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Public communications services vending method and apparatus

(57)

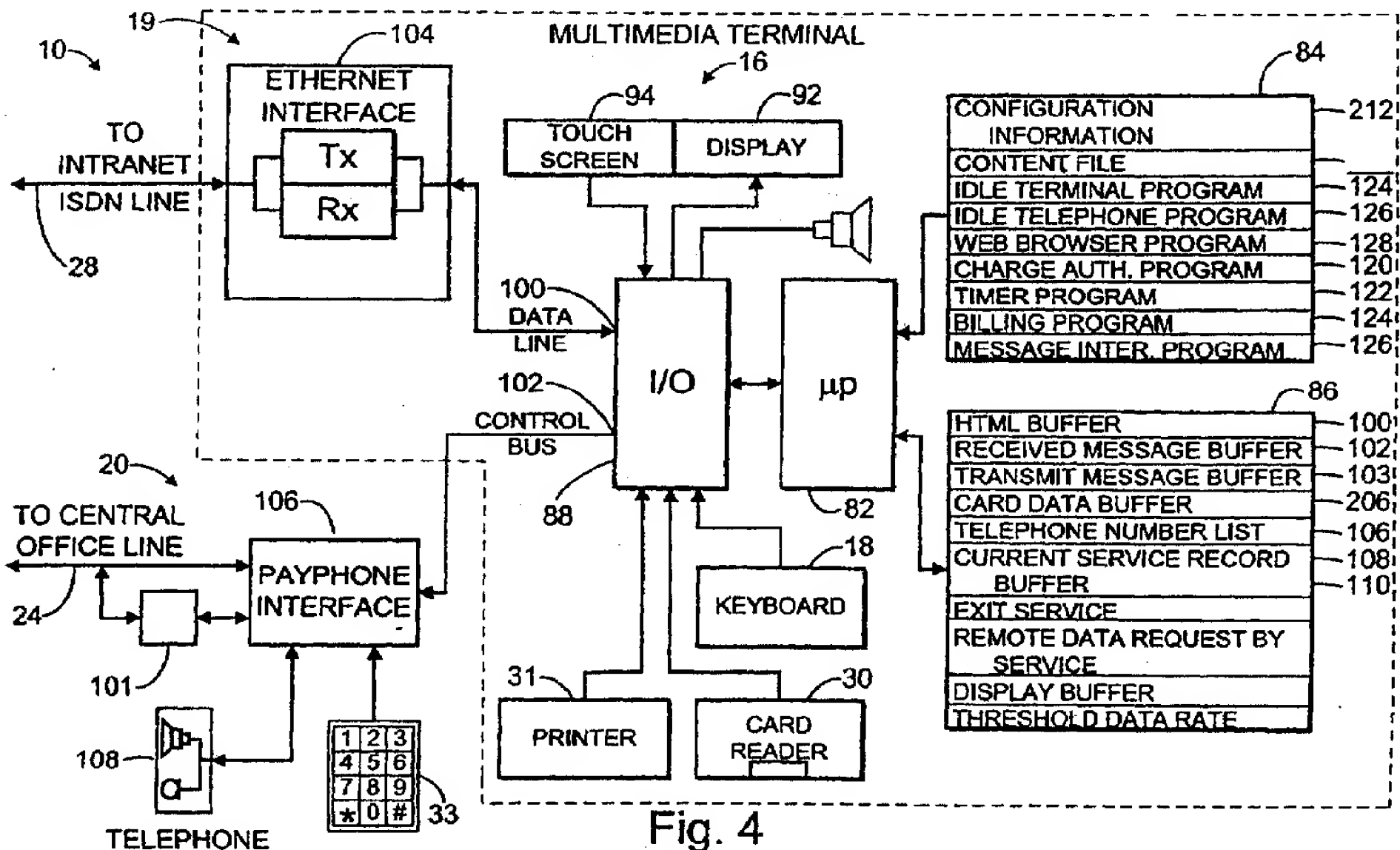
An apparatus and method for vending public communications services. The apparatus includes a tel-

phone, a multimedia terminal, and a payment receiver

for receiving an authorization to accept charges for en-

abling use of at least one of the telephone and the mul-

timedia terminal.



Description

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] This invention relates to an apparatus and method for vending telephone and multimedia services.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] Pay telephones are common in the prior art. With the recent advent of multimedia, it is desirable to vend multimedia services at a multimedia apparatus, much in a similar way to the way in the which public pay phone services are provided.

[0003] Public delivery of multimedia services such as electronic mail, Internet browsing and wayfinding have been attempted to date by placing a personal computer in a secure box. This approach has largely failed due to users being intimidated by personal computers, poor reliability of personal computers, the lack of useful services typically found on personal computers and the large effort required to maintain such computers.

[0004] In addition, existing multimedia services have used conventional touchscreen technology employing a display located behind a touchpad to display icons to indicate portions of the display the user is required to touch in order to effect certain functions and conventional mouse-based systems which require a user to point to a scroll button and drag the scroll button or click on it, in order to cause the display to scroll left, right, up or down. The use of a touchscreen requires the use of valuable display space to display buttons for the user to touch. In addition, the use of a pointing device may be difficult for some users. When using a touchscreen-based multimedia apparatus for browsing pages of information, slight problems with touchscreen calibration become very frustrating for users trying to use the scroll bars due to inherent, small and sensitive target points on the bar.

[0005] In addition, when users are using a public access multimedia apparatus with a keypad, they are often unsure of when they are meant to use the keypad for input. The more peripherals the multimedia apparatus has, the more unclear it is for the user as to when they should use the keypad or other peripherals.

[0006] On devices which provide audio output, it is desirable to be able to adjust the volume of such audio output. Where there are a plurality of audio output devices however, in a public multimedia apparatus, it is impractical to have a plurality of volume controls for each audio output device.

[0007] Existing display phone technology has been used in areas such as hotels and airports, etc., with some success. To provide a display of the type used in such multimedia apparatus in a public multimedia terminal, would be impractical, as a separate vacuum fluorescent display would be required.

[0008] With the advent of new payment methods in-

cluding credit cards, debit cards and the like, it is desirable that users be able to pay for services rendered by a public multimedia apparatus using any one of the available payment options. Requesting a user to initiate payment multiple times during a session is not acceptable.

[0009] Generally, public multimedia terminals charge a user either a set fee or charge by the minute, irrespective of the response of the multimedia terminal as seen by the user. Delays in such responses may be due to delays in receiving data from a network and it is not acceptable to expect a user to pay for delays or resource problems experienced by the network. The present invention seeks to address these and other needs.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0010] In accordance with one aspect of the invention, there is provided an apparatus for vending public communications services. The apparatus includes a telephone, a multimedia terminal, and a payment receiver for receiving an authorization to accept charges for enabling use of at least one of the telephone and the multimedia terminal.

[0011] Preferably, the apparatus includes a mechanism for rendering the telephone and the multimedia terminal operational in response to receipt of the authorization.

[0012] Preferably, the apparatus includes a display for displaying visual prompts associated with the operation of the telephone at the multimedia terminal.

[0013] Preferably, the apparatus includes a message receiver for receiving at least one message from a public telephone network.

[0014] Preferably, the display is operable to display at least one visual prompt in response to the at least one message.

[0015] Preferably, the apparatus includes a controller for directing the operation of the telephone in response to user-input received at the multimedia terminal.

[0016] Preferably, the user is provided with some indication that a particular input device is to be actuated.

[0017] Preferably, the apparatus includes physical scroll actuators on the multimedia terminal for receiving user-input for scrolling information displayed by the display.

[0018] By providing a scrolling mechanism which is separate from the touchscreen and which requires little dexterity to use, it is more intuitive for new users. It is preferable to provide a mechanism which provides a positive response as the user can feel the movement of the mechanism.

[0019] Preferably, the physical scroll actuators include left, right, up and down actuators for receiving user-input for scrolling information displayed by the display left, right, up and down respectively.

[0020] Preferably, the telephone includes a telephone handset having a receiver operable to communicate au-

dio signals to a user and preferably, the multimedia terminal includes a speaker operable to communicate audio signals to the user.

[0021] Preferably, the apparatus includes a common volume controller common to the telephone receiver and the speaker for selectively controlling the volume of signals produced by the telephone receiver or the speaker, depending upon which of the telephone and the multimedia terminal is in use.

[0022] Preferably, the apparatus has a single volume control which is context-sensitive and allows volume of any audio device in the system to be adjusted by the single control.

[0023] Preferably, the apparatus includes sensors for sensing which of the telephone and the multimedia terminal is in use.

[0024] Preferably, the display is operable to emulate a vacuum fluorescent display.

[0025] Preferably, the apparatus includes a keypad having transparent keys and a light adjacent the keys for selectively lighting the keys to indicate a user response is to be entered at the keys.

[0026] Preferably, the apparatus includes a file receiver for receiving a file from a server, the file including at least one of a file from an internet provider, a configuration file for configuring the apparatus and a content file for providing content for annunciation at the apparatus.

[0027] Preferably, the apparatus includes a configuration program for configuring the apparatus according to the configuration file.

[0028] Preferably, the apparatus includes a display image program for producing a display image at the apparatus in response to the content file.

[0029] Preferably, the apparatus includes an idle program for automatically producing a display image at the apparatus when the apparatus is not in use.

[0030] Preferably, the apparatus includes a telephone in-use display program for automatically producing a display image at the apparatus when the telephone is in use.

[0031] Preferably, the apparatus includes a web browser operable to transmit uniform resource locators to a web server located remotely of the apparatus, in response to user selection made at the multimedia terminal and for receiving at least one HTML page from the web server in response to the uniform resource locator and producing a display in response to the HTML page.

[0032] Preferably, the apparatus includes an in-use display program operable to produce a display image at the apparatus in response to the content file during an access time between transmission of the uniform resource locator and production of a display in response to the HTML page.

[0033] Preferably, the multimedia terminal is operable to provide a plurality of multimedia services.

[0034] Preferably, the apparatus includes a usage timer for cumulatively recording the time during which the multimedia services is in operation and maintaining

the recording of the time while data is received at the apparatus at a rate within a first range and suspending the recording of the time associated with the at least one service when data is received at the apparatus at a rate within a second range.

[0035] Preferably, the usage timer includes a first timer enabled in response to a request for access to at least one of the multimedia services at the apparatus, a data rate measurement device for determining a receive data rate at which data is received at the apparatus, memory for storing a pre-defined data rate value, and a comparator for comparing the receive data rate with the pre-defined rate value and for disabling the first timer when the pre-defined rate value is less than the pre-defined data rate value and for re-enabling the first timer when the receive data rate is equal to or exceeds the pre-defined data rate.

[0036] Preferably, the apparatus includes a plurality of timers associated with the multimedia services respectively for simultaneously cumulatively recording times during which the respective multimedia services are in operation.

[0037] Preferably, the timers are enabled in response to respective requests for access to respective services.

[0038] Preferably, the apparatus includes billing program code for directing the microprocessor to produce a bill for services rendered by the multimedia terminal and for usage of the telephone.

[0039] Preferably, the billing program code is operable to direct the processor to identify each service requested by the user, each time value accumulated on each timer associated with each service requested by the user respectively and a charge amount associated with each service, the charge amount being calculated from rate information associated with the each service respectively and the times indicated by the first timer associated with each service respectively.

[0040] Preferably, the apparatus includes a usage timer for cumulatively recording the time during which a service at the apparatus is in operation and suspending the recording of the time associated with the service during periods exceeding a pre-defined duration, during which the service is waiting for a response from an external service.

[0041] Preferably, the timer includes a first timer which is enabled in response to a request for access to at least one of the multimedia services at the apparatus, a time measurement device for determining the time period taken for a response to a request for information from an external service, memory for storing a pre-defined first time period value and a comparator for comparing the time period taken with the pre-defined first time period and for disabling the first timer when the time period taken is greater than the pre-defined first time period and for re-enabling the first timer when the time period taken is less than the pre-defined first time period.

[0042] Preferably, the apparatus includes a plurality

of timers associated with respective multimedia services for simultaneously cumulatively recording times during which the respective multimedia services are in operation.

[0043] Preferably, the timers are enabled in response to respective requests for access to respective services.

[0044] Preferably, the apparatus includes billing program code for directing the microprocessor to produce a bill for services rendered by the multimedia terminal and for usage of the telephone.

[0045] Preferably, the billing program code is operable to direct the processor to identify each service requested by the user, each time value accumulated on each timer associated with each service requested by the user respectively and a charge amount associated with each service, the charge amount being calculated from rate information associated with the each service respectively and the time indicated by the first timers associated with each service respectively.

[0046] In accordance with another aspect of the invention, there is provided a method of vending public communications services, the method including the steps of:

a) making available to a user public pay telephone services and multimedia services; and

b) rendering operational at least one of the telephone and multimedia terminal, in response to an authorization to accept charges received at a payment receiver.

[0047] Instead of scaling down a personal computer into a public device, the apparatus according to the invention, includes a stand-alone multimedia apparatus capable of providing both multimedia and telephone services in a single unit. By equipping a stand-alone multimedia apparatus with a coloured touchscreen, stereosound, keyboard, telephone handset/keypad and card reader, the multimedia apparatus is compact. The pay phone portion of the multimedia apparatus includes a telephony interface with on-board processor which communicates with the main control processor which controls the operation of the various peripherals of the pay phone. The pay phone configuration is downloadable from a central location through a modem link. The multimedia applications are linked to the pay phone control processor through another link. Administration of the multimedia apparatus is highly optimized by having it fully networked by a high bandwidth intranet allowing remote administration, central storage of applications and services, and centralized monitoring of the apparatus or apparatuses.

[0048] The physical scroll actuators located near the touchscreen improve the human-machine interface. Traditional scroll bars designed for mouse-based systems, where the user is required to touch a small area of the screen, are replaced by these actuators which

make the apparatus easier and more intuitive to use while conserving screen space for displaying more information. The scroll buttons cause the screen information to move up or down a line at a time for scrolling or to move up or down a page at a time when page scroll buttons are used.

[0049] The keyboard having keys which are selectively lighted when input from a user is required improves the usage of the apparatus by clearly identifying which keypad to use and when the apparatus is expecting input. The use of semi-transparent keys and a low power light source within the keypad makes this available. In addition, turning off the lighted keys, when all input has been received is useful to advise the user that no further input is required.

[0050] The sensor senses whether the user is using the telephone handset or the external speakers and a single set of volume of control buttons is used to alter the level of either the handset or the external speakers, depending upon which is in operation.

[0051] The visual prompts conventionally displayed by a traditional pay phone are presented on a colour screen in a virtual representation of a conventional pay phone vacuum florescent display. Messages normally sent to the pay phone vacuum florescent display are routed to its virtual equivalent on the colour screen and are formatted to produce the same colour and size of character that would have been seen on a pay phone vacuum florescent display.

[0052] In addition, the apparatus according to the invention allows users to pay for services rendered, using a smart card or electronic purse or a credit card. In addition, the user may pay for a voice call and may also simultaneously pay for a multimedia service such as electronic mail, Internet browsing or a one time purchase from an electronic mall. Effectively, the apparatus reacts to user actions by automatically adjusting a smart card debit value or decrementing a certain amount per minute based on the user's specific actions and any associated rates. Thus, a number of services may be used simultaneously by a user, such as speaking on the phone while browsing the Internet and/or purchasing an item. By allowing the user to conveniently pay for these services for a single insertion of a smart card or electronic purse, further usage of services is encouraged.

[0053] In addition, an aspect of the invention integrates payment timers closely with data delivery and suspends payment while the service is in a wait state such as waiting for an abnormally long response from the network or slow delivery of data. Thus, users are not charged for network outages or slow data transfer rates. By monitoring the response of the network in responding to requests for data and by suspending user payment while a pay phone or service is waiting for the network to respond, users are charged more fairly for services rendered by the apparatus.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0054]

Figure 1 is a schematic representation of an apparatus according to a first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 2 is a schematic diagram of a network to which the apparatus of Figure 1 is connected;

Figure 3 is a block diagram of a central server according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 4 is a block diagram of an electronic circuit according to a first embodiment of the apparatus;

Figure 5 is a schematic diagram of a computer architecture employed in the apparatus according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 6 is a schematic representation of programs in the apparatus according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 7 is a flowchart of a message interpreter according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 8 is a flowchart of a service request program according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 9 is a schematic representation of a service record according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 10 is a flowchart of a service usage request program according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 11 is a schematic representation of a service usage record according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 12 is a flowchart of a usage timer task program according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 13 is a flowchart of a pre-pay card task according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 14 is a flowchart of a telephone program according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 15 is a flowchart of a telephone advertising program according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 16 is a flowchart of a load content HTML

page program according to the first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 17 is a flowchart of a card clearing task program according to the first embodiment of the invention; and Figure 18 is a flowchart of an idle terminal program according to the first embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Figure 1

[0055] Referring to Figure 1, an apparatus for vending public communications services, according to a first embodiment of the invention is shown generally at 10. The apparatus includes a public communications services Kiosk apparatus having a base 12 in which is mounted a computer 14, a display 16 and a keyboard 18, together acting as a multimedia terminal 19. The base 12 also has a telephone mounted thereon, the telephone being shown generally at 20.

The telephone 20 is in communication with a public telephone network 22 via a central office telephone line 24 equipped with an answer supervision feature. The telephone includes a microphone 21 and a telephone receiver 23, the telephone receiver being operable to communicate audio signals to a user.

[0056] The computer 14 is connected to a central server 26 by a communications line 28 which may include an Ethernet 10 base T connection.

[0057] Also mounted on the base 12 is a credit card reader 30, a printer 31 and a telephone dial pad 33. Also mounted on the base are physical scroll actuators shown generally at 32, which are in communication with the computer 14 for directing the computer 14 to effect functions associated with the display 16. The physical scroll actuators include left, right, up and down actuators 35, 37, 39 and 41 for receiving user input for scrolling information displayed by the display left, right, up and down respectively, line by line or page by page.

[0058] Also secured to the base are left and right stereo speakers 43 and 45 for communicating audio signals to a user, in connection with multimedia services provided at the multimedia terminal. A common volume control 47 common to the telephone receiver 23 and the speakers 43 and 45 includes first and second actuator buttons mounted on the base 12 for selectively controlling the volume of signals produced by the telephone receiver 23 or the speakers 43 and 45, depending upon which of the telephone and multimedia terminal 19 is in use by a user.

[0059] The keyboard has semi-transparent keys and a low power light source mounted thereunder selectively operable to be turned on and off.

[0060] Generally, the computer 14 controls all operations of components mounted on the base 12, including the telephone 20 and multimedia terminal 19.

Figure 2

[0061] Referring to Figure 2, a schematic diagram of the connection of the computer 14, shown in Figure 1 to the central server 26 is shown generally at 34.

[0062] In this embodiment, the public communications services Kiosk apparatus 10 is one of a plurality 36 of kiosk apparatus connected to an intranet 38 private network on the communications line 28 in communication with the central server 26. A plurality 27 of vendor servers are also connected to the intranet 38, for communication with the central server 26. The central server 26 is further in communication with the Internet 40 to which a plurality of further vendor servers 42 and content providers 49 are connected. Thus, the vendor servers 27 are in communication with the central server 26, and the central server 26 is in communication with the kiosk apparatus 36.

Figure 3

[0063] Referring to Figure 3, a block diagram of the central server is shown generally at 26. The central server includes an internet gateway interface 44, a web server interface 46, a file server interface 48, a transaction server interface 50, an automated services interface 52, a terminal monitoring interface 54, a reporting interface 56, a terminal configuration interface 58, a content manager interface 60 and a database 62.

[0064] The internet gateway interface 44 provides a high speed dedicated high bandwidth connection such as a T1 connection to the Internet 40, for receiving HTML pages or at least one multimedia file from an Internet provider and for providing uniform resource locators (URLs) to vendor servers (42) and content providers (43) connected to the Internet 40.

[0065] The Internet gateway interface 44 is also in communication with the web server interface 46 which is in communication with the database 62 and is in communication with the kiosk terminals 36 by way of an HTML/applet pipe 64. The web server interface 46 is thus able to transmit HTML pages and applet programs to the kiosk apparatus 36 by way of the HTML/applet pipe 64. In addition, the web server interface 46 is operable to provide content files from the database 62 to the Kiosk apparatus 36 through the HTML/applet pipe 64. Effectively, the web server determines the type of content requested by a apparatus and extracts the requested files from the database 62 or the Internet 40 and transmits the requested files to the public communications services Kiosk apparatus.

[0066] The file server interface 48 is also in communication with the database 62 and with Kiosk apparatus 36. Communication with the apparatus is conducted by way of a configuration and content file pipe 66 by way of which configuration and content files obtained from the database 62 are transmitted by the file server interface 48 to the kiosk apparatus 36.

The transaction server interface 50 is further in communication with the database 62 and with the kiosk apparatus 36. Communication between the transaction server and the kiosk apparatus 36 is provided by a request/reply pipe 68. The transaction server is thus able to receive request messages from the kiosk apparatus 36, interpret such requests, and transmit suitable replies on the request/reply pipe 68. The transaction server is further in communication with a credit card service 70 such as Bank of Montreal and is further in communication with at least one rating system 72 which, in this embodiment, includes MORRIS (trademark) offered by Bell-Canada. The transaction server interface 50 communicates with the credit card service 70 by transferring validations and billings. Validations include requests from the transaction server interface 50 for card validation to authorize charges to appear on a card and include the transfer of billing information, such as amounts and card numbers to which charges are to be applied by the credit card service 70.

[0067] The transaction server interface 50 also communicates with the credit card service to store files in the data base, relating to local card clearing information. The transaction server interface 50 communicates rate requests and receives replies from the rating system 72, in relation to telephone billing rates, commercial services rates, etc. Rate requests are made by the transaction server to the rating system 72 and the rating system 72 replies with the requested rates. Such rates are then provided to the kiosk apparatus 36 by way of the request reply pipe 68.

[0068] The automated services interface 52 is in communication with the database 62, a billing system 74 and a backup system 76. The automated services interface 52 provides billing records to the database 62 and to off-premises billing systems 74 and further provides data relating to the contents of the database 62 to backup systems 76.

[0069] The terminal monitoring interface 54, reporting interface 56, terminal configuration interface 58 and content manager interface 60 are all in communication with an administrative staff terminal 78 which administrative staff use to configure the central server 26 and monitor its functions. The terminal monitoring interface 54 effectively provides to the administrative staff terminal 78 a typical control room interface and maintains a monitor of alarms associated with various functions of the central server, for example, loss of communication to any one of the kiosk apparatus 36. The terminal monitoring interface 54 maintains an alarm table in the data base 62.

[0070] The reporting interface 56 monitors transactions between the central server and the database to accumulate statistics regarding the amount of money made by each kiosk apparatus 36 and the number of times particular services are used etc. The reporting interface 56 thus stores statistical files and usage rate files in the data base 62.

[0071] The terminal configuration interface **58** is used to receive operational information from operators, such as timeout numbers, screen information, etc., serial number of units, service records including service identifications, service types and service rates etc. and stores such information in the database **62** as configuration files which identify how a apparatus is to be configured to present multimedia services to a user.

[0072] The content manager interface **60** receives advertising and information regarding user interface buttons, from the administrative staff terminal **78**. The content manager interface **60** stores such information as advertising content files, HTML pages and applets in the database **62**.

[0073] The database **62** thus includes configuration files for configuring apparatus **36** to present multimedia services to a user, billing records, advertising or multimedia content files for providing multimedia content to the apparatus, statistical information relating to services rendered, HTML pages and multimedia files received from an Internet provider for use at the apparatus, applets for execution at the apparatus, usage rates, an alarm table, and local credit card information for validating credit cards used at the apparatus.

[0074] Each of the interfaces of the central server **26** includes respective program steps for directing a computer within the central server to perform the indicated interface functions.

[0075] The central server may be formed as a single computer or may be formed over a distributed network. In general, such a single computer or distributed network acts as a transmitter for transmitting for receipt by at least one public communications services Kiosk apparatus **36**, over a private network, a multimedia configuration file for configuring the apparatus to present multimedia services to a user. Such transmitter also transmits multimedia content files of actual multimedia content available to users at the public communications services Kiosk apparatus.

Figure 4

[0076] Referring to Figure 4, a block diagram of the kiosk apparatus computer **14** is shown. The kiosk apparatus effectively includes a multimedia terminal **19** and a telephone **20**.

[0077] The multimedia terminal portion includes a microprocessor **82** in communication with non-volatile memory **84**, volatile memory **86** and an I/O port **88**. The I/O port is in communication with display **16** which includes a video display **92** and a touchscreen **94**, each individually in communication with the I/O port **88**. In this embodiment, the display and touchscreen are integrated into a single unit approximately **10** to **12** inches diagonal and has an adjustable viewing cone for public and private usage applications.

[0078] The I/O port is further in communication with the card reader **30**, the printer **31**, the keyboard **18** and

a speaker driver **25** for driving the speakers **43** and **45**. The I/O port also has first and second communications ports **100** and **102**, the first communications port **100** being connected to an Ethernet interface **104** which is connected to the intranet via a high speed connection such as an ISDN line and is operable to signal to the microprocessor through the I/O port an indication of whether or not a message has been received and whether or not a complete transmission of a file has been received.

[0079] The second communications port **102** is connected to a pay phone interface which is connected to the central office line **24**. Also, connected to the pay phone interface, are the telephone dial pad **33** and a handset **108** on which is mounted the microphone **21** and receiver **23**.

[0080] In effect, the microprocessor **82** is in communication with the display **16**, the card reader **30**, the printer **31**, the keyboard **18** and the speaker driver **25**, the Ethernet interface **104** and the pay phone interface **106** via the I/O port **88**. The keyboard has transparent keys and a light adjacent the keys for selectively lighting the keys to indicate a user response is to be entered at the keys. After a user response has been entered, the light is turned off. The light is controlled by any application program running at the apparatus.

[0081] The pay phone interface is operable to pick up and drop the central office line and includes a sensor **101** to indicate to the second communications port **102**, whether or not the central office line is in use by the pay phone interface **106**.

[0082] The volatile memory **86** is organized by the microprocessor **82** to include a plurality of buffers including:

Figure 5

[0083] Referring to Figure 5, the architecture of the multimedia apparatus is shown generally at **150**. The architecture includes the components shown in Figure 4 in a hardware layer **152** thereof.

[0084] The architecture further includes an operating system **154**. The operating system in this embodiment, is of the type provided by Microware, known as **OS/9** (trademark). The properties of this operating systems are that it has high recoverability, it is suitable for real time operation, it has compatibility with the indicated hardware devices, it has built-in fault recovery, and it is well supported by the microprocessor. In addition, this operating system is licensed to interact with the Java programming language.

[0085] The architecture further includes a Java virtual machine **156** which allows programs to run without recompiling. Java also provides an easy high level interface and has a convenient class library which gives programmers a convenient application programmatic interface (API) set.

[0086] The architecture further includes a core pro-

gram layer **158** including billing programs **160**, hardware drivers **162** and administration software **164**, and pay telephoning programs **165**.

[0087] The core program layer looks after such features as maintenance such as notifying the central server of a time to load more paper into the printer, provides a user interface, manages network connectivity and download features for downloading files from the central server and for providing pay phone functionality.

[0088] The architecture **150** further includes a virtual machine **166** which includes a custom web browser **168** and an audio video player **170**. The custom web browser **168** provides an interface between the user and the multimedia terminal and the audio video player provides visual images on the display **16** and audio/sound bytes on the speakers for advertising, for example.

[0089] The architecture further includes an application layer shown generally at **172** including a messaging services application **174**, a vertical market application **176**, an electronic commerce application **178** and an entertainment application **180**. The messaging services application **174** includes features such as e-mail, voice e-mail and fax. The vertical market application **176** includes government services and banking. The electronic commerce application **178** includes ticket sales and virtual mall displays. The entertainment application **180** includes Internet browsing capabilities, gaming, chat rooms and newsclips.

Figure 6

[0090] Referring to Figure 6, a chart of high level programs stored in the non-volatile memory is shown generally at **200**. Each of the programs listed in the chart is associated with the core program layer **158** shown in Figure 5, with the exception of the custom web browser **168** which is associated with the virtual machine **166** of Figure 5, and the vertical market **176**, messaging services **174**, electronic commerce **178** and entertainment **180** applications modules shown in Figure 5.

[0091] The programs include a main program **202** which the apparatus runs in the background. In response to an interrupt received at the first communications port **100** in Figure 4, a message interpreter program is invoked.

Figure 7

Message Interpreter

[0092] Referring to Figure 7, the message interpreter includes a block **204** which directs the microprocessor **82** shown in Figure 4 to read the I/O port **88** to determine whether or not the receive message buffer **206** is loaded. If not, the microprocessor is directed to continue to test the I/O port **88** to determine when the buffer is loaded. If the buffer is not loaded within a timeout period, the microprocessor **82** is returned to the main program **202**

shown in Figure 6.

[0093] Referring back to Figure 7, if the receive message buffer is loaded, block **208** directs the microprocessor **82** to determine the type of message received. If the message is of a configuration type, it indicates that a configuration file has been downloaded from the central server. The configuration file includes information relating to rates, advertising, content, and local card clearing information. Block **210** directs the processor to load this information into non-volatile memory **84** shown in Figure 4. Thus, a configuration file **212** is stored in the non-volatile memory **84**.

[0094] Upon completion of storing the configuration file, the microprocessor **82** is returned to the main program **202** shown in Figure 6.

[0095] Referring back to Figure 7, if the message type read by the microprocessor **82** at block **208** is of the non-configuration type, block **214** directs the microprocessor **82** to return to the calling program, which in this embodiment, is the main program **202**.

Service Selection

[0096] Referring back to Figure 6, if a user makes a service request, to use either a multimedia service or a telephone service offered by the apparatus, a service request program **216**, shown in Figure 8 is invoked. A service request for use of the pay telephone is provided by a user by simply lifting the handset **108** shown in Figure 4, whereupon the sensor **101** detects connection to the central office line and provides a signal over the second communications port **102** to the I/O port to indicate to the microprocessor **82** that a request to use the telephone has been made.

[0097] On the other hand, pressing any key on the keyboard will be interpreted by the microprocessor **82** as a request for multimedia services.

[0098] Referring to Figure 8, upon selection of a service by a user, a code indicating the type of service, telephone or multimedia, is produced, depending upon the state of the handset and whether or not a key on the keyboard has been actuated. Block **218** directs the processor to store this code as a type code to indicate whether telephone services or multimedia services have been requested. Block **220** then directs the microprocessor **82** to a telephone branch **222** or to a multimedia branch **224** specified by the service type code stored at block **218**.

[0099] If the user has requested a multimedia service, block **228** directs the microprocessor to cause to be displayed on the display **92**, a menu of available multimedia services and to wait for a user selection of a desired service. The user does this by pressing on the touch screen **94** whereupon a message indicating the area of the touch screen touched, is provided to the microprocessor. The microprocessor interprets the message as an indication of the user's selection and on reference to a lookup table (not shown), an identification code for the

selected service is obtained. The microprocessor **82** then augments the initial code previously stored in connection with the service request program (at Block **218** in Figure **8**) to produce a service identification code to indicate the specific multimedia service requested. If the user had selected to use the telephone, a service identification code associated with the telephone service is produced. Thus, a service identification code is produced to indicate the type of service requested by the user.

[0100] Block **230** then uses the service identification code to lookup a service record stored in non-volatile memory.

Figure 9

Service record

[0101] Referring to Figure **9**, a service record **231** includes a service identification field **233**, a service type field **235** and a service rate field **237**. The contents of these fields are provided from the configuration file received from the central server. Generally, the service record relates service identifications with service types and associated service rates. The service record associated with the service identification specified by the user is retrieved from memory and stored in a current service record buffer in volatile memory.

[0102] Referring back to Figure **8**, block **232** directs the microprocessor **82** to launch the service specified by the contents of the service identification field **233** and at the same time to launch a corresponding service usage task associated with the requested service.

[0103] To launch one of the multimedia services, a web browser application, virtual market interface application, messaging service application or electronic commerce application is loaded and run, depending upon the service requested by the user. Alternatively, if the user has requested telephone service, a telephone application is launched. It will be appreciated that more than one application can be launched at a time and, therefore, it is possible for the user to simultaneously use telephone services and multimedia services at the same time.

Figures 10 and 11

[0104] Referring to Figure **10**, the corresponding service usage task begins with block **236** which directs the processor to produce a service usage record as shown in Figure **11**. The service usage record includes a transaction identification field **240**, a service identification field **242**, a date/time field **244**, a duration field **246**, a charge field **248**, a payment method field **250** and a card number field **252**. Initially, the contents of each of these fields is zero, however, after the blank record has been created, the transaction identification field is loaded with a unique reference number to uniquely identify the

transaction, the service identification field is loaded with the service identification of the service record shown in Figure **9**, the date and time field **244** is loaded with the date and time of the current transaction, and the duration, charge payment method and card number fields **246-252** are left blank.

[0105] Referring back to Figure **10**, block **254** directs the processor to present a prompt on the display **92** to request the user to indicate the preferred payment method, if applicable. The use of some services may be free and, if so, the payment method block **254** will receive a code from the launched service indicating that such service is free. In this event, the service usage record **238** is unchanged at this point. If, on the other hand, the user inserts a credit card, the card reader presents to the microprocessor a code indicating that a credit card has been inserted in which case, the payment method is selected as post-pay. Alternatively, if the user inserts a debit-type card, a code indicating a pre-payment method is presented by the card reader to the microprocessor such that at block **254**, the microprocessor interprets the preferred method of payment as pre-pay.

[0106] Referring to Figure **11**, in the case where the user has selected the post-pay payment method, card number information relating to the card to which charges are to be applied is stored in the card number field **252** and the payment method field **250** is loaded with a code indicating post-payment method. The duration and charge fields **246** and **248** are left blank.

[0107] Referring to Figure **10**, block **258** then directs the processor to launch a usage timer task associated with the service.

Figure 12

[0108] Referring to Figure **12**, the usage timer task is shown generally at **260** in Figure **12** and begins with a first block **262** which directs the processor to start a timer for cumulatively recording the time during which the corresponding service is in operation. Thus, there is a first timer which is enable in response to a request for access to at least one multimedia service at the public communications service vending apparatus. In this embodiment, the timer counts seconds.

[0109] It should be noted that a usage timer task is launched in association with each service requested by the user. Therefore, there are a plurality of timers associated with the multimedia services respectively, for simultaneously cumulatively recording times during which respective multimedia services are in operation and furthermore, such timers are enabled in response to respective requests for access to respective services.

[0110] Block **264** then directs the processor to determine which payment method has been selected by the user and if the free payment method has been selected, the processor is directed to block **266** which determines whether or not the user has pressed an exit button on the touchscreen indicating the service is to be ended. If

so, block **268** directs the usage timer to stop and the usage timer task is ended. If the user has not quit the service, as detected at block **266**, the processor is directed back to block **262** which continues the operation of the usage timer and the above process is repeated.

[0111] If the user has requested the post-payment method, block **270** directs the processor to determine whether or not the service has requested data from the remote server. If it has not, blocks **266**, **268**, **262** and **264** are repeated until data is requested.

[0112] When data is requested, block **274** directs the microprocessor **82** to read the first communications port **100** to determine whether or not a complete response has been received. It will be appreciated that the data request may require the transfer from the central server to the apparatus of a rather large file which may take some time to receive.

[0113] If a complete response has been received, blocks **266**, **268**, **262**, **264**, **270** and **272** are repeated until a situation exists where a request for data has been sent to the remote service, but a complete response has not yet been received. In this situation block **276** directs the processor to determine a data receive rate at which data is received by observing the number of blocks of data received each second. The processor thus acts as a data receive rate measurement device.

[0114] After calculating the data receive rate, block **278** directs the processor to compare the receive data rate with a predefined threshold rate stored in non-volatile memory. If the data receive rate is at or above the predefined threshold rate, the processor is directed to block **279** where the usage timer is re-enabled if it had been previously disabled or is simply left running if it already was running. The processor is then directed back to block **274**, whereupon the receive data rate is continually determined and tested against the threshold rate unless the data arrives at a rate below the threshold rate in which case block **280** directs the processor to disable the usage timer started at block **262**, but maintain its current value and to return to block **274** which again calculates the data arrival rate and compares it against the threshold rate, etc. Thus, the effect of blocks **274-280** is to disable or pause the usage timer when data is received at a rate less than the predefined threshold data rate value and to re-enable or maintain the operation of the usage timer when data arrives at or above, that is exceeds the predefined threshold rate, until the complete response has been received.

[0115] Thus, the usage timer cumulatively records the time during which the associated multimedia service is in operation and maintains the recording of such time while data is received at the apparatus at a rate within a first range ie., above the threshold rate and suspends the recording of time associated with the service when data is received at a rate within a second range, ie., below the threshold rate.

[0116] If at block **264**, the processor determines that the payment method was a pre-pay method, block **282**

directs the processor to launch a pre-pay card task.

Figure 13

5 **[0117]** Referring to Figure **13**, the pre-pay card task is shown generally at **282**. This task begins with Block **284** which directs the processor to debit the user's debit card by a predetermined amount corresponding to a pre-pay time increment, which, in this embodiment, is one
10 minute.

[0118] Block **286** then directs the processor to start or reset a pre-pay timer implemented by the processor. The pre-pay timer is operable to calculate time in minutes.

15 **[0119]** Block **288** then directs the processor to determine whether or not the usage timer to which reference was made in Figure **12** at block **262**, is running.

[0120] If the usage timer is not running, block **290** directs the processor to disable or pause the pre-pay timer. The pre-pay card task then is maintained in a loop comprised of blocks **288** and **290** until the usage timer (of Figure **12**) is re-enabled. When the usage timer is re-enabled, block **292** directs the processor to re-enable the pre-pay timer. Block **294** then directs the processor
20 to determine whether or not the user has requested to exit the service and if so, the pre-pay card task is exited.

[0121] If the user has not requested to exit the service, block **296** directs the processor to determine whether or not the pre-pay period has expired. If the pre-pay period has not expired, the processor is directed back to block **288** and the above steps beginning at block **288** are repeated.

[0122] If on the other hand at block **296**, the pre-pay period has expired, the processor is returned to block **284** which again debits the user's smart card by a predefined amount corresponding to the pre-paid time increment.

[0123] Referring back to Figure **10**, after launching the usage timer task and the pre-pay card task, if necessary, block **298** directs the processor to determine whether or not the service has ended. If the service has ended, block **300** directs the processor to apply the service rate stored in the service rate field **237** of the service record **231** shown in Figure **9**, to the usage timer value stored in the duration field **246** of the service usage record shown in Figure **11**, to calculate the contents of the charge field **248**.

[0124] The processor is then directed to block **302** which directs the processor to submit the service usage record **238** to the central server by transmitting it on the intranet. The processor is then directed to block **304** which directs the processor to determine whether or not the user has requested the pre-payment or post-payment method in which case the processor is directed to block **306** which causes the microprocessor **82** to print a receipt at the receipt printer **31**. If the user has requested a free service, the service usage task is ended.

[0125] The service usage task, therefore also, acts a

billing program code operable to direct the processor to identify each service requested by the user and a charge amount associated with each service, the charge amount being calculated from rate information associated with the service and the time indicated by the first timer associated with the service. More generally, the service usage task program acts as a billing program for directing the microprocessor to produce a bill for services rendered by the multimedia terminal and for usage of the telephone.

[0126] It will be appreciated that at block **302**, on submission of the usage record to the data base at the central server, the statistical files in the database may be updated to reflect usage of the service.

[0127] Referring back to Figure **8**, if at block **220** the microprocessor **82** determines that the user had requested use of the telephone, blocks **230** and **232** are executed as described above, only instead of a multimedia service being launched, a telephone service program is launched.

Figure 14

[0128] Referring to Figure **14**, the telephone service program is shown generally at **348**. This program begins with block **350** which launches a telephone advertising program shown in Figure **15**.

Figure 15

[0129] Referring to Figure **15**, the telephone advertising program is shown generally at **350**. The program begins with block **354** which directs the processor to read the second communications port **102** to determine whether or not the pay phone interface **106** indicates that the central office line is offhook. If the central office line is not off hook, the telephone advertising program is ended and the telephone program is ended.

[0130] If, on the other hand, at block **354** the central office line is offhook, block **356** directs the processor to retrieve the content file to obtain display advertising content. Such content is loaded into the display buffer and the processor is directed to block **358** which directs the processor to run a display advertising program to cause advertising to be displayed on the display **92** while the telephone is in use.

[0131] Referring back to Figure **14**, upon launching the telephone advertising program, block **352** launches a conventional telephone routine program.

[0132] The conventional telephone routines include routines which receive visual information and drivers contained within the core program layer **158** serve to take control of, at least, a portion of the display **92** to provide various pay telephone options to the user. Thus, the multimedia apparatus is used to display options for pay telephone usage. In addition, further drivers allow the user to enter answers to options presented on the display, using the keyboard to enter user names, calling

card numbers, etc. In response to such input received from a user, certain functionality of the pay phone is rendered operational. Thus, the multimedia apparatus is operable to display and receive information relating to the operation of the pay telephone.

Applications

[0133] Referring back to Figure **6**, the apparatus also includes an idle terminal program shown generally at **400**. This program is run when no messages have been received and no service requests have been made, ie. the apparatus is idle.

[0134] The idle terminal program begins with block **402** which directs the processor to retrieve a content file from the non-volatile memory. The content file includes multimedia display and sound information for displaying and annunciating advertising while the apparatus is idle or, in other words, not in operation by the user. Such advertising may be used to attract users to the apparatus or to simply expose users to advertising. After retrieving such advertising information, a display image program is launched to cause the display **92** and speakers to be driven by graphics files and sound byte files accordingly. Thus, the idle terminal program acts as an idle program for automatically producing a display image at the public communications services Kiosk when the public communications services Kiosk is not in use. In addition, the display program acts as a display image program for producing a display image at the public communications services Kiosk apparatus in response to the contents of the content file.

[0135] Referring back to Figure **6**, the applications programs including the messaging services, vertical market, electronic commerce and entertainment programs, retrieve from the content file, HTML pages which interact with the custom web browser **168** in the virtual machine layer of the apparatus architecture. Effectively therefore, content providers associated with these applications, are able to submit HTML pages to the administrative staff terminal **78** shown in Figure **3** for inclusion by the content manager interface **60** in content files stored in the database **62**. The administrative staff terminal **78** then directs the terminal configuration interface **58** to make a notation in a configuration file, identifying content files which are to be made available to users and the configuration file and content files are sent to Kiosk apparatus **36** by the file server interface **48**.

[0136] At the apparatus receiving such files, when a multimedia service is launched, effectively the content files specified by the configuration file are made available to the web browser as HTML pages. By receiving content from content providers in the HTML page format, a relatively standard, uniform interface for receiving such information is provided rendering the apparatus extremely functional with an open architecture.

[0137] Generally, HTML pages, in this embodiment, are designed to cooperate with a physical screen size

of 800 pixels wide by 600 pixels high. In addition, each HTML page is intended to be compatible with Netscape Navigator 3.01 (Trademark) upon which the custom web browser 168 shown in Figure 6 is based. The browser, however, is customized in that it is programmed to respond to non-conventional HTML commands including a Kiosk:print command, a Kiosk:quit command, a Kiosk:phone command, a Kiosk:help command and a Kiosk:card command. In addition, the web browser is customized to be responsive to Java and JavaScript.

[0138] In this embodiment, the HTML pages provided by content providers are designed to define virtual buttons on the display, such that the user can employ the touchscreen to signify actuation of a button shown in the display to cause the function associated with such button to be effected. Scrolling of a large HTML page is provided by actuation of the scroll actuators shown generally at 32 in Figure 1.

[0139] The functionality associated with certain virtual buttons specified by an HTML page may involve the dispatch of uniform resource locators (URLs) to web addresses on the World Wide Web. Referring back to Figure 3, such URLs are received at the web server interface 46 which sends the URL through the Internet gateway interface 44 to the Internet 40 to access the identified web site and download an HTML page associated with such web site. The HTML page to be downloaded is received at the Internet gateway interface 44 from the Internet 40 and the Internet gateway interface 44 forwards the HTML page to the web server interface 46 which forwards the HTML page to the requesting apparatus via the HTML/applet pipe 64.

[0140] At the apparatus, the HTML page is received by the custom web browser 168 which executes the functionality specified by the downloaded HTML page.

[0141] Any HTML page provided from an external World Wide Web site or from a content provider, may include one of the additional HTML commands referred to above.

[0142] In connection with these commands, the Kiosk:print command is used to cause the printer 31, shown in Figure 4 to print simple, unformatted strings.

[0143] The Kiosk:quit command provides a vehicle to exit a web-based application or HTML page of a current content provider.

[0144] The Kiosk:phone command includes a URL definition which is interpreted by the web browser as a request to dial a telephone number. Thus, for example, the content provider may present a display with a plurality of buttons, resembling an automatic dialler and upon contacting the touchscreen adjacent one of such buttons, the Kiosk:phone command is invoked to cause a telephone number to be dialled. Thus, the microprocessor takes control of the telephone interface, causing the telephone line to go offhook. A timeout period may then be provided to allow the user time to pick up the handset which, if not picked up, will direct the microprocessor to terminate the telephone call.

[0145] The Kiosk:help command is associated with a URL defining a help window within which there may be a Kiosk:phone command which provides immediate access to a help desk operated by the content provider.

[0146] The Kiosk:card command directs the web browser to present to the user, display indicia requesting the user to insert a credit card or debit card to which a purchase of services or merchandise is to be applied. After the card has been read, the web browser calls a result URL predefined by the content provider. This command is associated with certain parameters such as a clear parameter indicating whether or not the vendor is to clear the card or whether the operator of the central server is to clear the card, a card type parameter which lists card types supported, an amount field identifying the dollar amount of the transaction, a transaction type to identify a sale or return, a prompt operable to override any default prompt provided by the web browser, an authorization number for providing an authorization number associated with the charge, an operator identification for use with debit card transactions and a product information parameter for information such as delivery address, buyer name, model number, etc.

25 Card purchases

Figure 16

[0147] Referring to Figure 16, a card purchase program for allowing a user to purchase a service or goods provided by a content provider is shown generally at 400. Effectively, the content provider creates an HTML order page including a "Kiosk:card" command. When the user requests a service which allows a user to purchase goods or services, the web browser calls the HTML page associated with the related content provider. In response to the HTML page, a display purchase menu, specified in the HTML page by the content provider, is displayed as indicated at 402. Within this display, a virtual button associated with a Kiosk:card command is included. If the user actuates the button, block 404 detects the issuance of the Kiosk:card command and directs the processor to launch a card clearing task 406 shown in Figure 17.

45 Card clearing task

Figure 17

[0148] Referring to Figure 17, the card clearing task begins with block 360 which directs the processor to actuate the card reader to identify the type of card. Block 362 then directs the processor to a lookup table which is addressed to determine whether or not the card inserted is supported by the apparatus. If the card is not supported, block 364 directs the processor to reject the card. If the card is supported, however, block 366 directs the processor to perform a card format and valid data

test on the data read from the card. If the card format or data is not valid, block **368** directs the processor to reject the card.

[0149] If the card information is valid, block **370** directs the processor to send the card data to the central server **26** by way of a message sent through the request and reply pipe **68** shown in Figure **3** to the transaction server interface **50**.

Referring back to Figure **3**, the transaction server then looks up local card clearing files stored in the database **62** to determine whether or not the card should be rejected and if, based on these files, the card should be rejected, a reply message to this effect is sent back to the apparatus where block **374** directs the processor to reject the card. If the server determines that the card should not be rejected, a message to this effect is sent back to the apparatus where block **376** directs the processor to determine, by reference to the HTML page containing such information, whether or not the goods or services presented by the content provider for purchase can be purchased or acquired by pre-authorization. In other words, there is a code in the HTML file indicating whether or not the goods or services sought by the user can be purchased outright or purchased on the basis of a pre-authorization.

[0150] If the goods or services can be obtained by pre-authorization, block **378** directs the processor to prepare a request to send to the server to obtain clearance from the credit card service **70**. Alternatively, if the goods or services must be purchased without pre-authorization, block **380** directs the processor prepare a request message including the purchase price of the goods or services sought by the user and to send the request message to the server via the request and reply pipe **68**. The request message is received at the transaction server interface **50** which queries the credit card service **70** for validation of the purchase and card information. If such information is validated by credit card service **70**, the credit card service issues a reply message to the transaction server interface **50** which forwards such message via the request and reply pipe **68** to the requesting apparatus **36**.

[0151] Block **382** directs the processor to read the reply message to determine whether or not the card has been accepted by the credit card service. If the card has not been accepted, block **384** directs the processor to reject the card. On the other hand, if the card is accepted, block **386** directs the processor to allow the purchase to proceed.

[0152] Referring back to Figure **16**, block **408** then directs the processor to advise the seller of the purchase by sending a message through the HTML applet pipe **64** to the web server interface **46** and through the Internet gateway interface **44** to the Internet and to the content provider. In response, the content provider issues a Kiosk:print command, which is received via the web server at the requested apparatus and which is interpreted by the microprocessor as a request to print information ac-

companying the Kiosk:print command at the printer **31**. Thus, the printer is used to print a receipt for the transaction just enacted.

5 Alternatives

[0153] As an alternative to suspending the operation of the usage timer when the receive data rate is less than the predefined value, an alternative apparatus includes first timers associated with respective services, the first timers being started in response to respective requests for access to respective services. In addition, the apparatus includes second timers associated with each service respectively, the second timers being started in response to transmission of special requests to external services, such requests being initiated by the respective services. The apparatus then checks each of the second timers to determine whether or not any of such timers holds a value greater than a predefined value associated with its respective service. Corresponding first timers are disabled for each service having a second timer having a value greater than a predefined value. The first timers are re-enabled when the service has received a response to its request. In effect, this amounts to timing the time taken to receive a response to a request and if the time taken exceeds a predefined value, suspending charging the user while the data is received. The steps of billing and producing a billing record as described above, are generally the same.

[0154] More generally, the apparatus according to the second embodiment records times during which a plurality of respective services are in operation and suspends the recording of such times for each service waiting for data for a period of time greater than a predetermined time, until the data is received.

[0155] In addition, generally there is a first timer for recording time during which a service is in operation and there is a second timer rendered operable when the service requests data, the second timer being operable to disable the first timer to suspend the recording of time when the second timer acquires a value exceeding a predefined value representing the time during which the service is waiting for data, in response to a request for data, and the second timer re-enabling the first timer when the data is received.

[0156] Each service may have a respective predefined value and thus, effectively, each first timer is suspended in operation or paused, according to its own predefined value.

[0157] In summary, an apparatus and method is provided for vending public communications services. The apparatus includes a telephone, a multimedia terminal, and a payment receiver for receiving an authorization to accept charges for enabling use of at least one of the telephone and the multimedia terminal.

[0158] While specific embodiments of the invention have been described and illustrated, such embodiments should be considered illustrative of the invention only

and not as limiting the invention as construed in accordance with the accompanying claims.

Claims

1. An apparatus for vending public communications services, the apparatus comprising:
 - a) a telephone;
 - b) a multimedia terminal;
 - c) a payment receiver for receiving a charge authorization for use of at least one of said telephone and said multimedia terminal.
2. An apparatus as claimed in claim 1 further including a mechanism for rendering said at least one of said telephone and said multimedia terminal operational in response to receipt of said authorization.
3. An apparatus as claimed in claim 1 or 2 further including a display for displaying visual prompts associated with the operation of said telephone at said multimedia terminal.
4. An apparatus as claimed in claim 3 further including a message receiver for receiving at least one message from a public telephone network.
5. An apparatus as claimed in claim 4 wherein said display is operable to display at least one visual prompt in response to said at least one message.
6. An apparatus as claimed in claim 3 further including a controller for directing the operation of said telephone in response to user-input received at said multimedia terminal.
7. An apparatus as claimed in claim 4 further including physical scroll actuators on said multimedia terminal for receiving user-input for scrolling information displayed by said display.
8. An apparatus as claimed in claim 1 wherein said telephone includes a telephone handset having a receiver operable to communicate audio signals to a user and wherein said multimedia terminal includes a speaker operable to communicate audio signals to said user.
9. An apparatus as claimed in claim 8 further including a common volume controller common to said telephone receiver and said speaker for selectively controlling the volume of signals produced by said telephone receiver or said speaker, depending upon which of said telephone and said multimedia terminal is in use.
10. An apparatus as claimed in claim 9 further including sensors for sensing which of said telephone and said multimedia terminal is in use.
11. An apparatus as claimed in claim 3 wherein said display is operable to emulate a vacuum fluorescent display.
12. An apparatus as claimed in any preceding claim further including a keypad having transparent keys and a light adjacent said keys for selectively lighting said keys to indicate a user response is to be entered at said keys.
13. An apparatus as claimed in any preceding claim further including a file receiver for receiving a file from a server, said file including at least one of:
 - a) a file from an internet provider;
 - b) a configuration file for configuring said apparatus; and
 - c) a content file for providing content for annunciation at said apparatus.
14. An apparatus as claimed in claim 13 further including a configuration program for configuring said apparatus according to said configuration file.
15. An apparatus as claimed in claim 13 further including a display image program for producing a display image at said apparatus in response to said content file.
16. An apparatus as claimed in claim 13 further including an idle program for automatically producing a display image at said apparatus when said apparatus is not in use.
17. An apparatus as claimed in claim 13 further including a telephone in-use display program for automatically producing a display image at said apparatus when said telephone is in use.
18. An apparatus as claimed in claim 13 further including a web browser operable to transmit uniform resource locators to a web server located remotely of said apparatus, in response to user selection made at said multimedia terminal and for receiving at least one HTML page from said web server in response to said uniform resource locator and producing a display in response to said HTML page.
19. An apparatus as claimed in claim 18 further including an in-use display program operable to produce

a display image at said apparatus in response to said content file during an access time between transmission of said uniform resource locator and production of a display in response to said HTML page.

20. An apparatus as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 19 wherein said multimedia terminal is operable to provide a plurality of multimedia services.

21. An apparatus as claimed in claim 20 further including a usage timer for cumulatively recording the time during which at least one of said multimedia services is in operation and maintaining the recording of said time while data is received at said apparatus at a rate within a first range and suspending the recording of said time associated with said at least one service when data is received at said apparatus at a rate within a second range.

22. An apparatus as claimed in claim 20 further including a usage timer for cumulatively recording the time during which a service at said apparatus is in operation and suspending the recording of said time associated with said service during periods exceeding a pre-defined duration, during which said service is waiting for a response from an external service.

23. A method of vending public communications services, the method comprising the step of:

a) making available to a user public pay telephone services and multimedia services; and

b) rendering operational at least one of said telephone and multimedia services, in response to an authorization to accept charges.

24. A method as claimed in claim 23 further including the step of displaying visual prompts associated with the operation of said telephone at said multimedia terminal.

25. A method as claimed in claim 23 further including the step of receiving at least one message from a public telephone network and displaying at least one visual prompt in response to said at least one message.

26. A method as claimed in claim 23 further including the step of directing the operation of said telephone from said multimedia terminal.

27. A method as claimed in claim 25 further including the step of scrolling information displayed by said multimedia terminal in response to actuation of physical scroll actuators mounted on a base to

which said multimedia terminal and said telephone are mounted.

28. A method as claimed in claim 23 further including the step of communicating audio signals to a user by at least one of a telephone receiver and a speaker drive by said multimedia terminal.

29. A method as claimed in claim 28 further including the step of selectively controlling the volume of signals produced by said telephone receiver and said speaker, depending upon which of said telephone and said multimedia terminal is in use.

30. A method as claimed in claim 29 further including the step of sensing which of said telephone and said multimedia terminal is in use.

31. A method as claimed in claim 23 further including the step of emulating a vacuum fluorescent display.

32. A method as claimed in any preceding claim further including the steps of receiving a file from a server, said file including at least one of:

a) a file from an internet provider;

b) a configuration file for configuring said apparatus; and

c) a content file for providing content for annunciation at said apparatus.

33. A method as claimed in claim 32 further including the step of configuring said apparatus according to said configuration file.

34. A method as claimed in claim 32 further including the step of producing a display image at said apparatus in response to said content file.

35. A method as claimed in claim 32 further including the step of automatically producing a display image at said apparatus when said apparatus is not in use by said user.

36. A method as claimed in claim 32 further including the step of automatically producing a display image at said apparatus when said telephone is in use.

37. A method as claimed in claim 32 further including the step of making a web browser available to said user, said web browser being operable to transmit uniform resource locators to a web server located remotely of said apparatus, in response to user selection made at said apparatus and receiving at least one HTML page from said web server in response to said uniform resource locator and pro-

ducing a display in response to said HTML page.

- 38.** A method as claimed in claim **37** further including the step of producing a display image at said apparatus in response to said content file during an access time between transmission of said uniform resource locator and production of a display in response to said HTML page. 5
- 39.** A method as claimed in any one of claims **23** to **38** further including the step of providing a plurality of multimedia services at said multimedia terminal. 10
- 40.** A method as claimed in claim **39** further including the step of cumulatively recording the time during which at least one of said multimedia services is in operation and maintaining the recording of said time while data is received at said apparatus at a rate within a first range and suspending the recording of said time associated with said at least one service when data is received at said apparatus at a rate within a second range. 15 20
- 41.** A method as claimed in claim **39** further including the step of suspending the recording of said time associated with at least one of said services during periods exceeding a pre-defined duration, during which said at least one of said services is waiting for a response from an external service. 25 30

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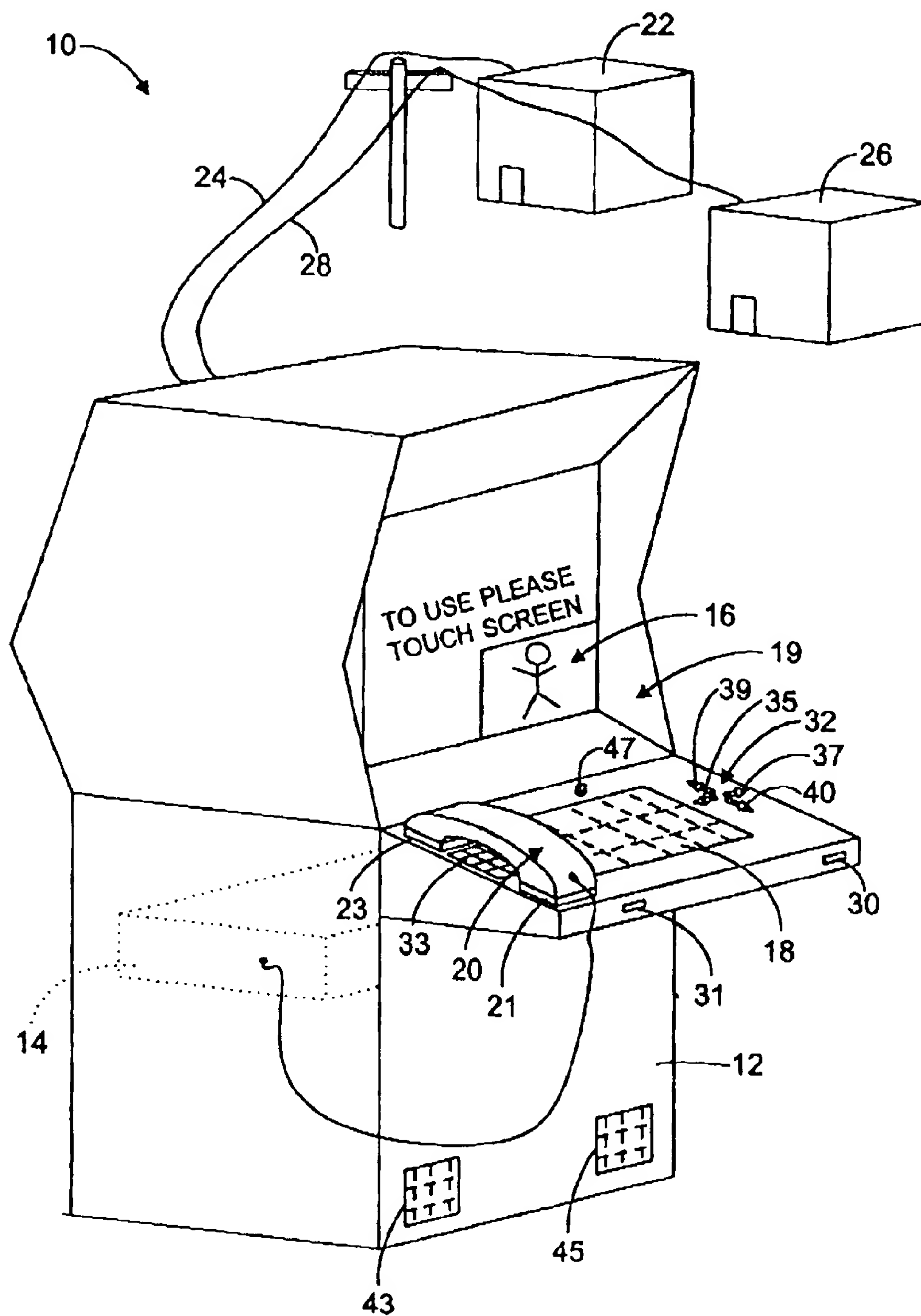


Fig. 1

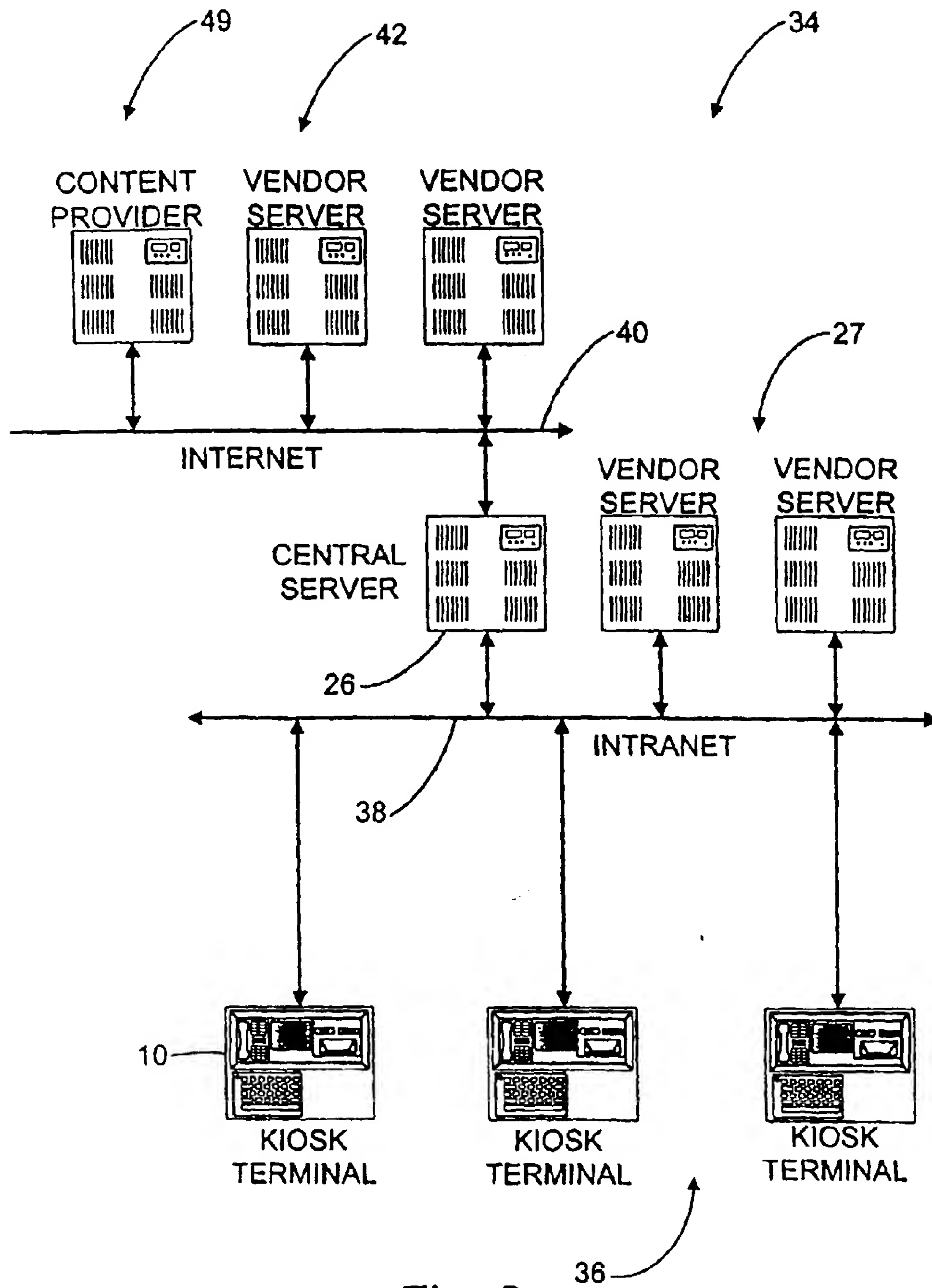
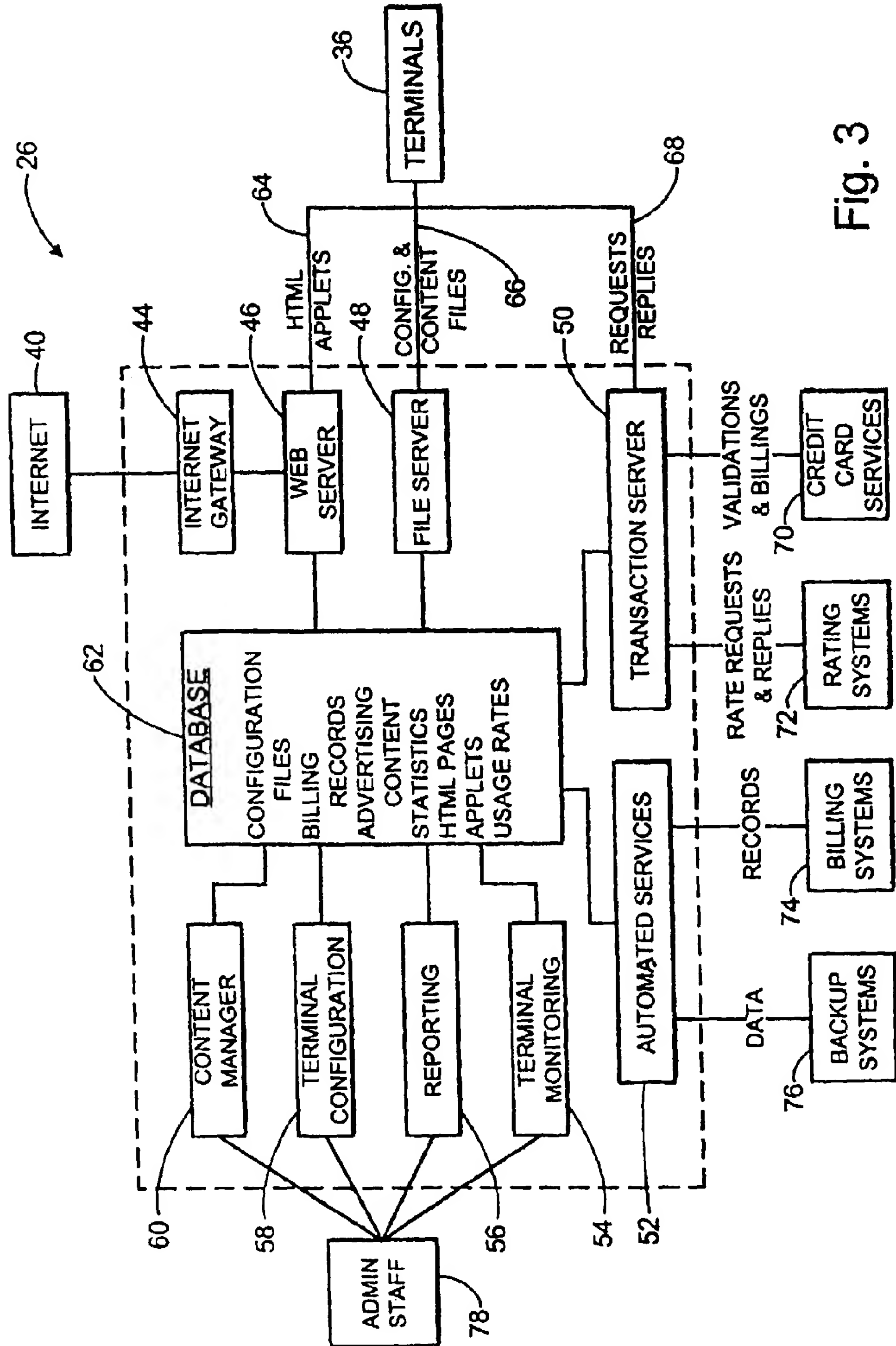


Fig. 2



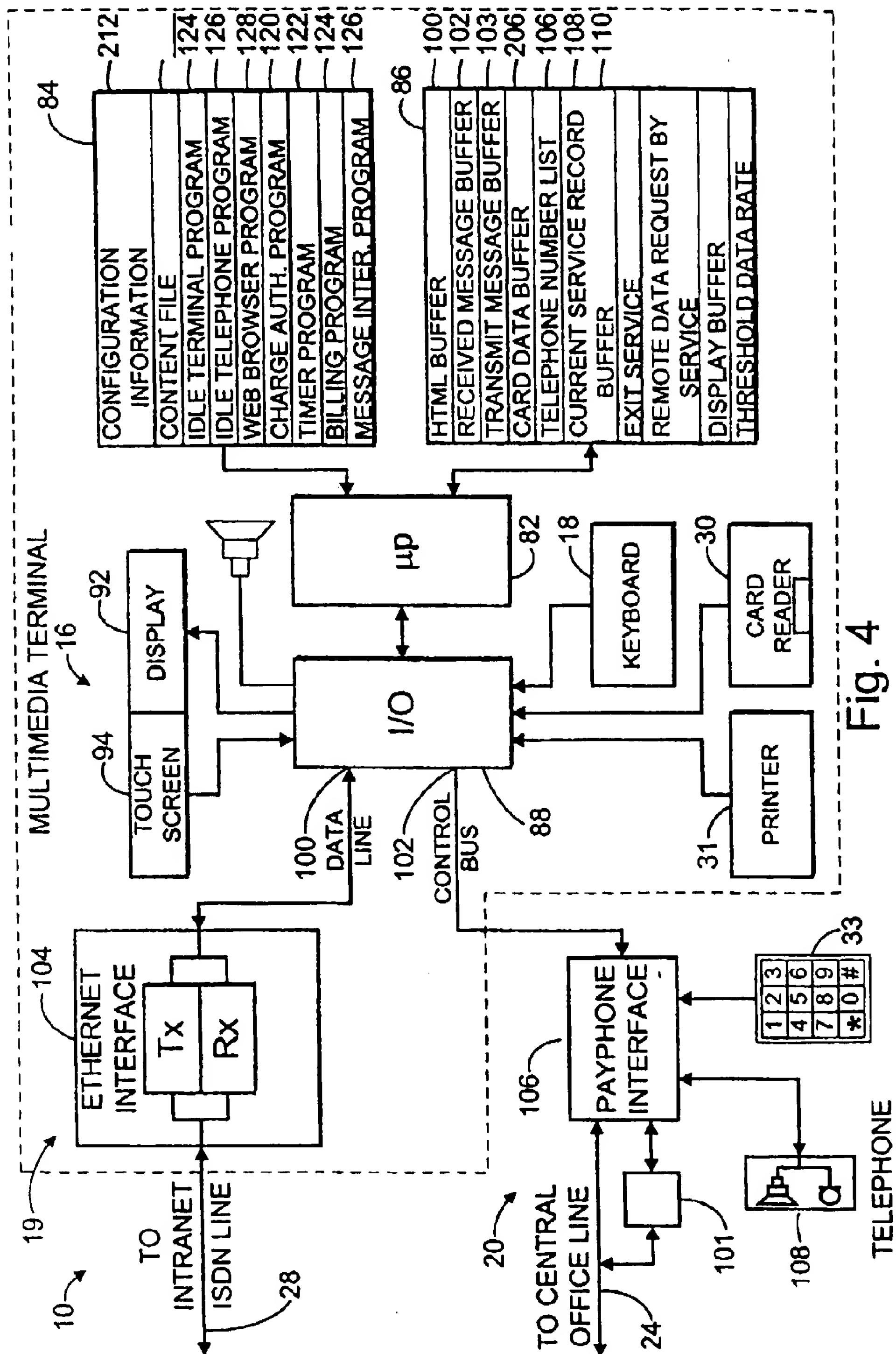


Fig. 4

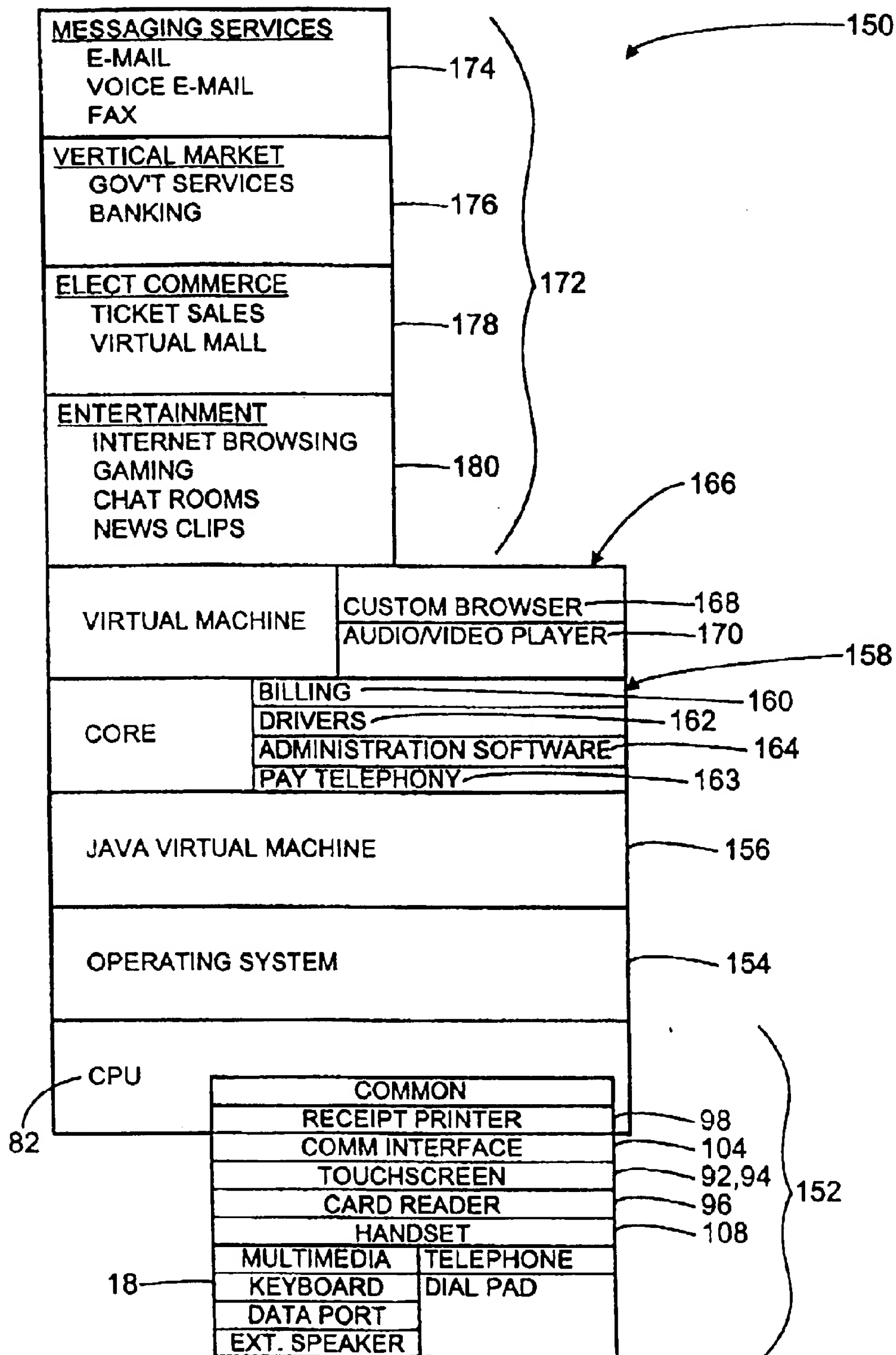


Fig. 5

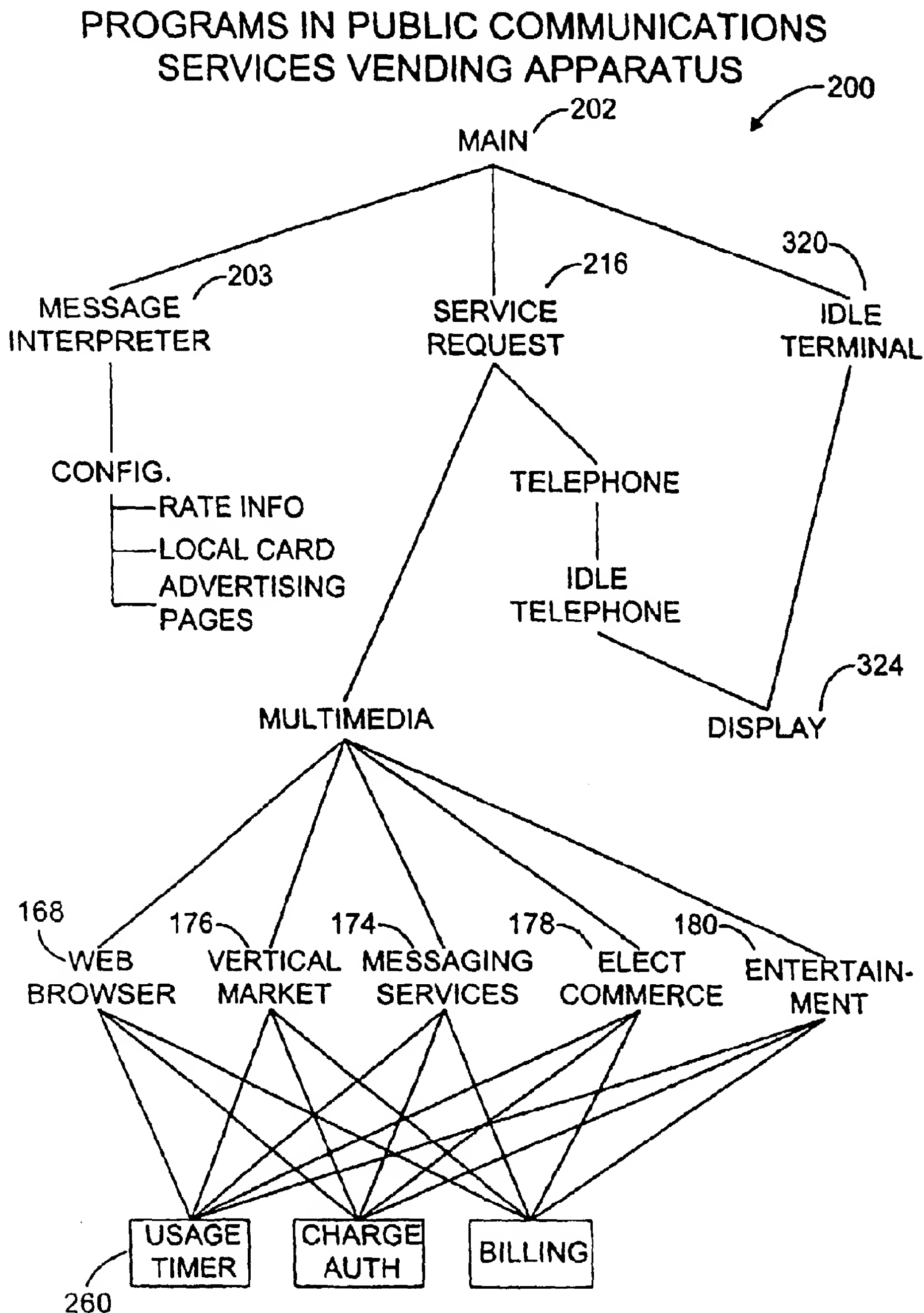


Fig. 6

MESSAGE INTERPRETER

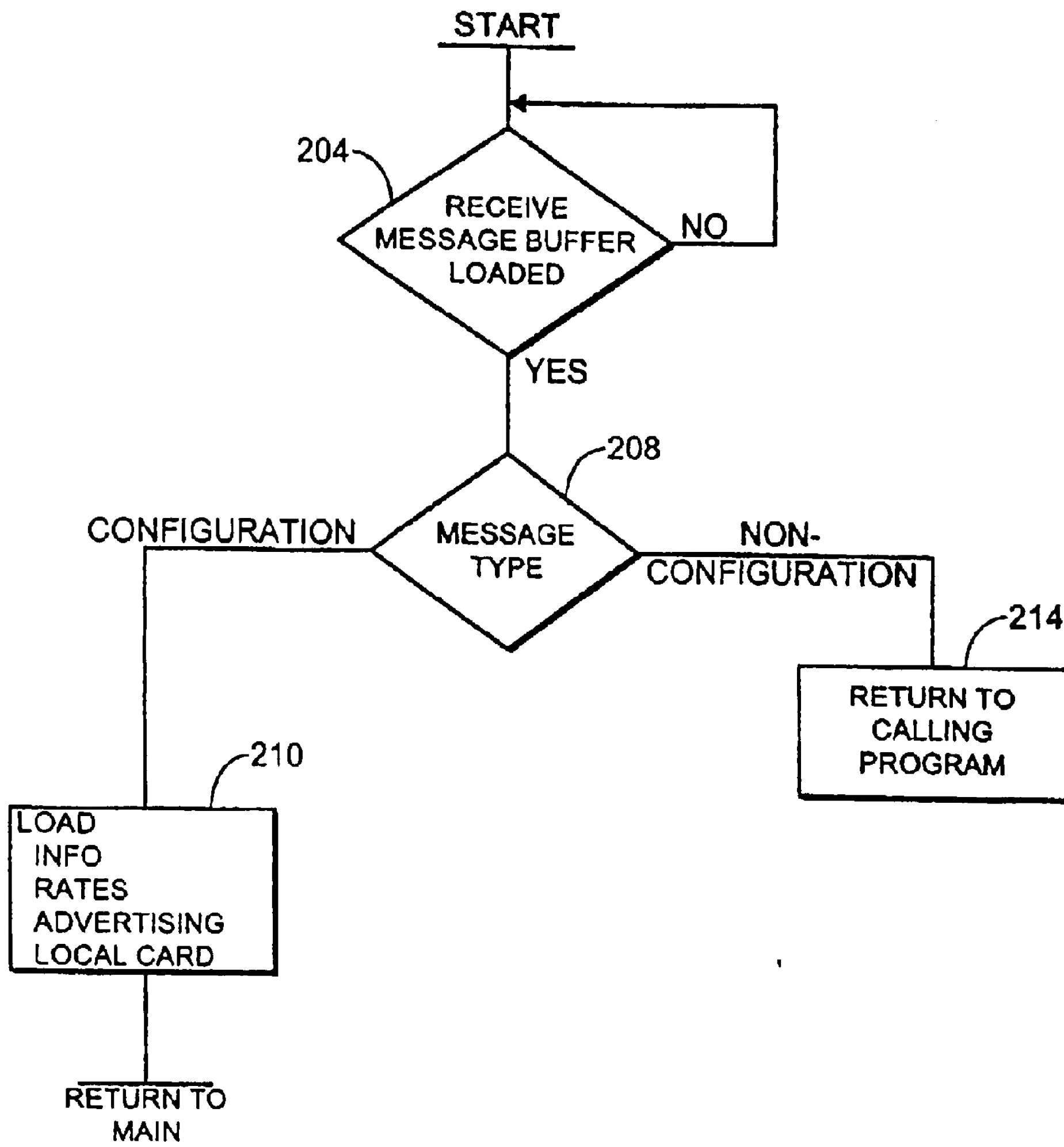


Fig. 7

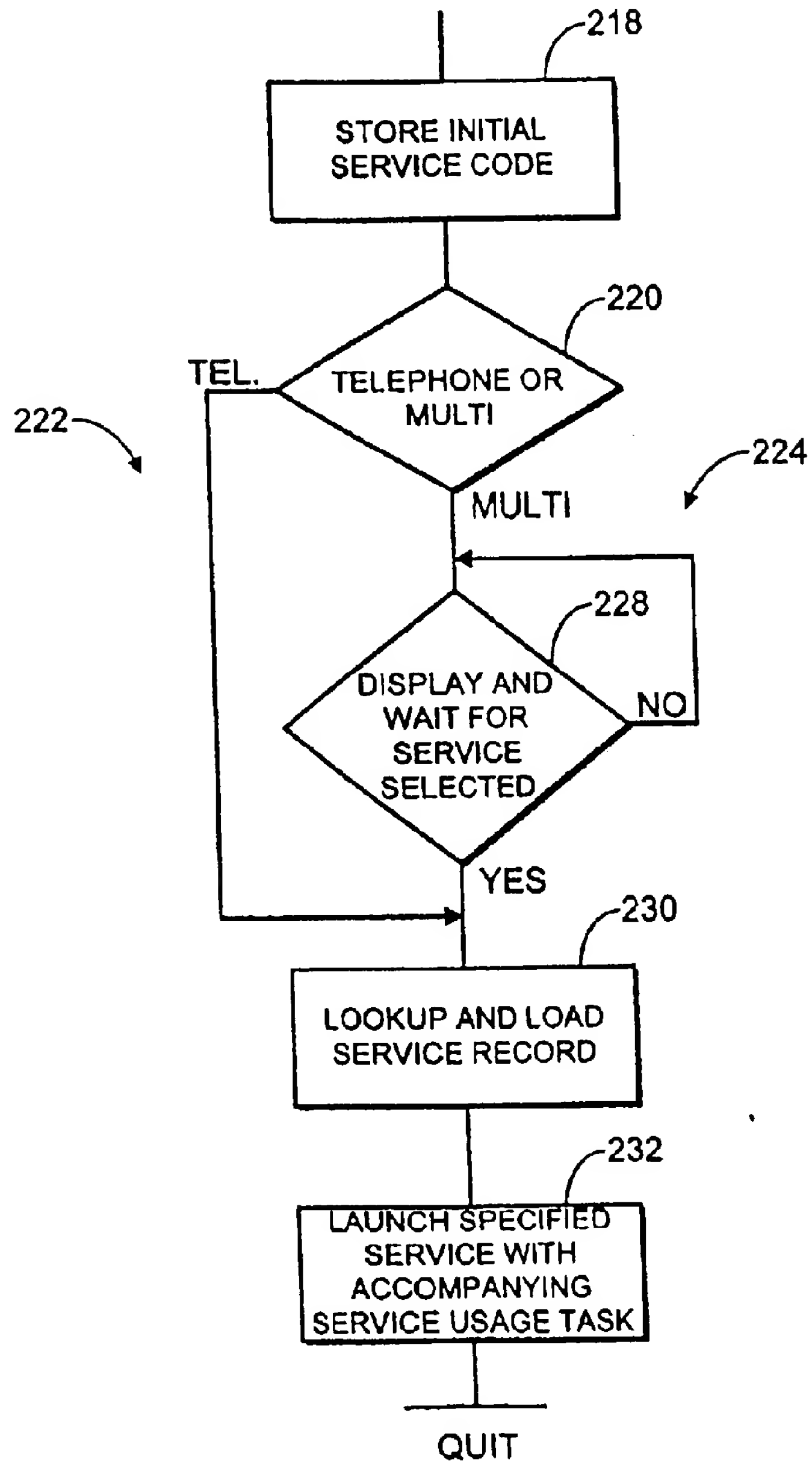
SERVICE REQUEST
PROGRAM

Fig. 8

231

SERVICE RECORD

233 235 237

SERVICE ID	SERVICE TYPE	SERVICE RATE
"	"	"
"	"	"
"	"	"
"	"	"

Fig. 9

238

SERVICE USAGE RECORD

240 242 244 246 248 250 252

TRANSACTION ID	SERVICE ID	DATE/TIME	DURATION	CHARGE	PAYMENT METHOD	CARD NUMBER
"	"	"	"	"	"	"
"	"	"	"	"	"	"

Fig. 11

SERVICE USAGE REQUEST

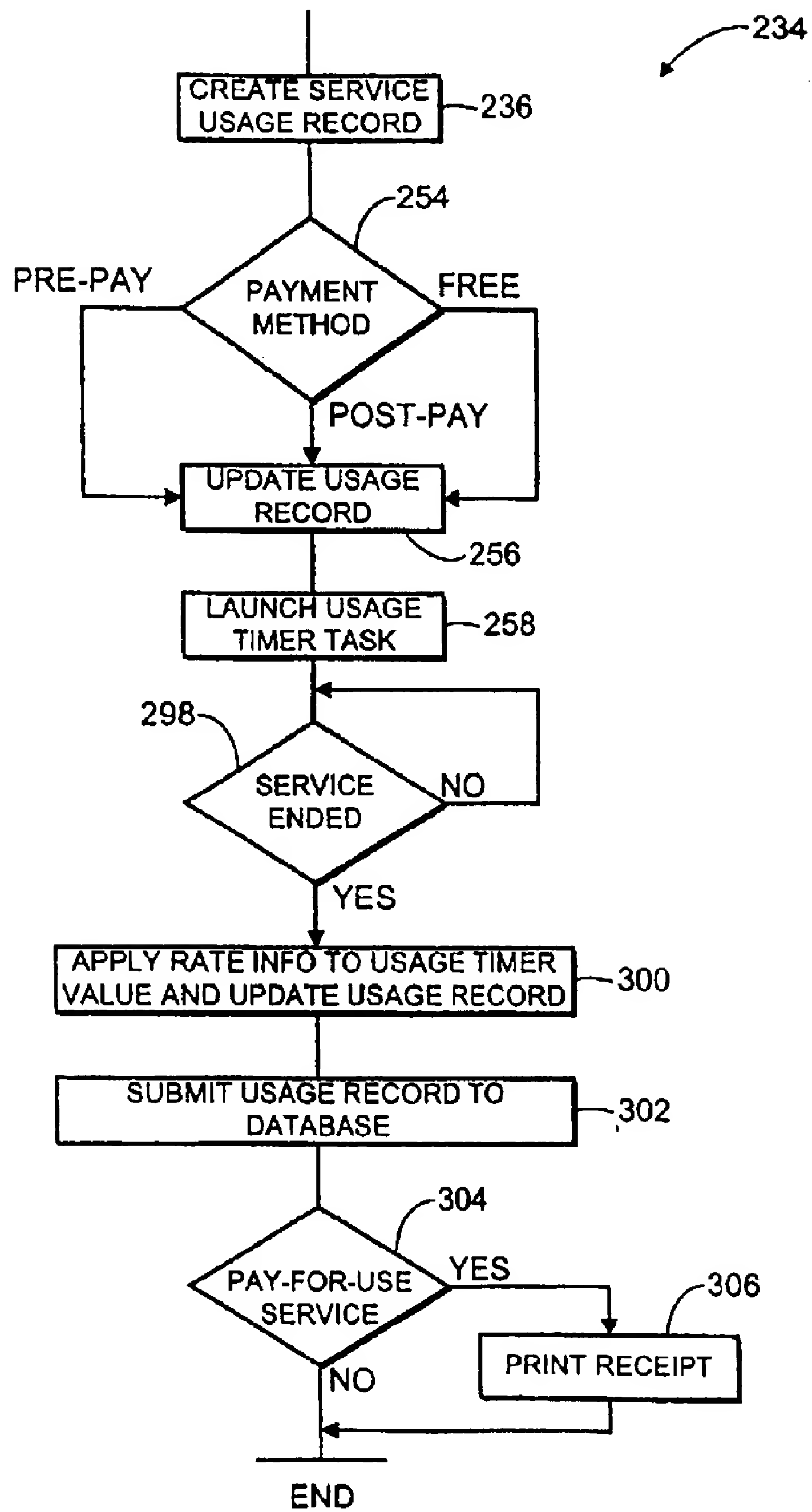


Fig. 10

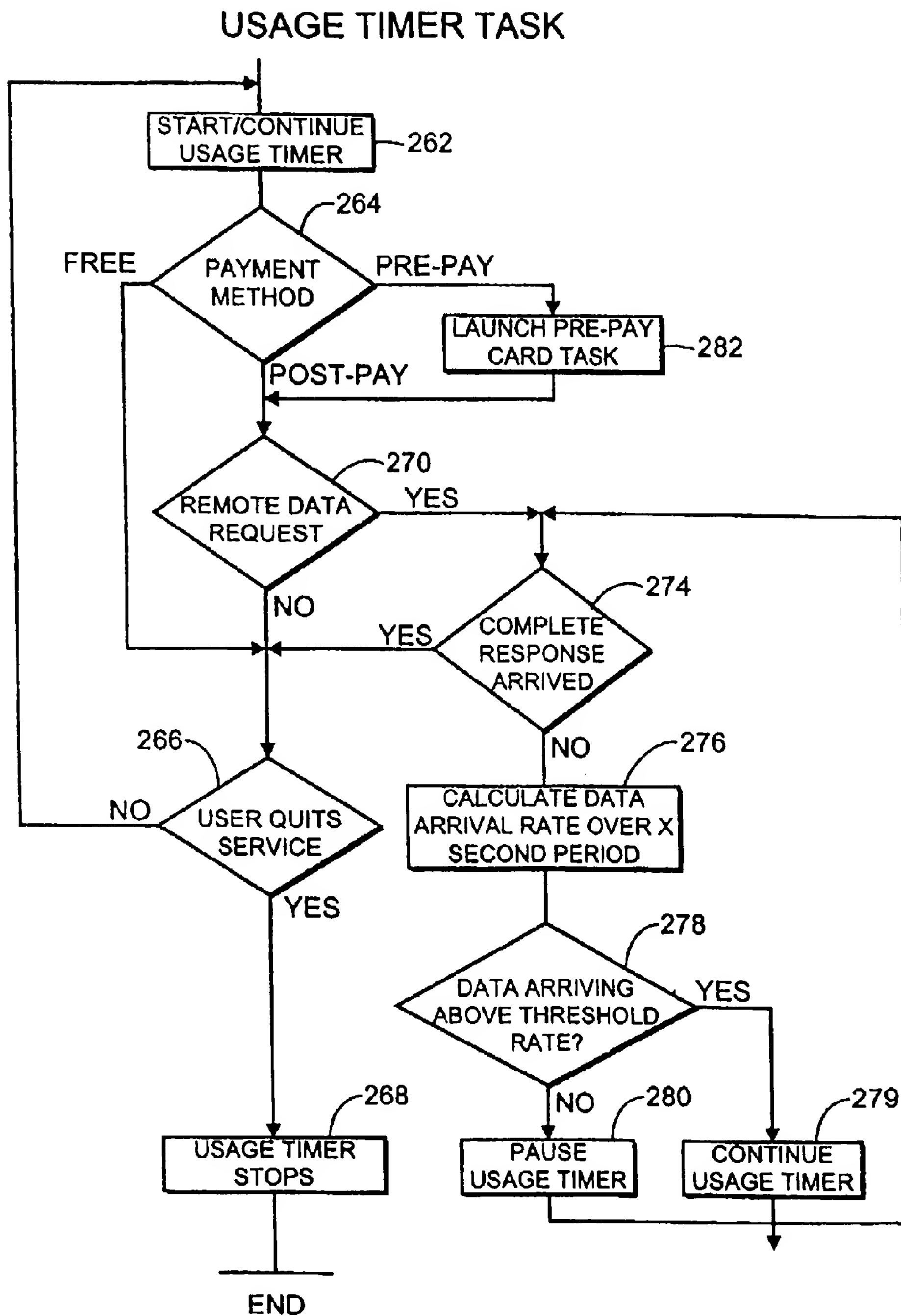


Fig. 12

PRE-PAY CARD TASK

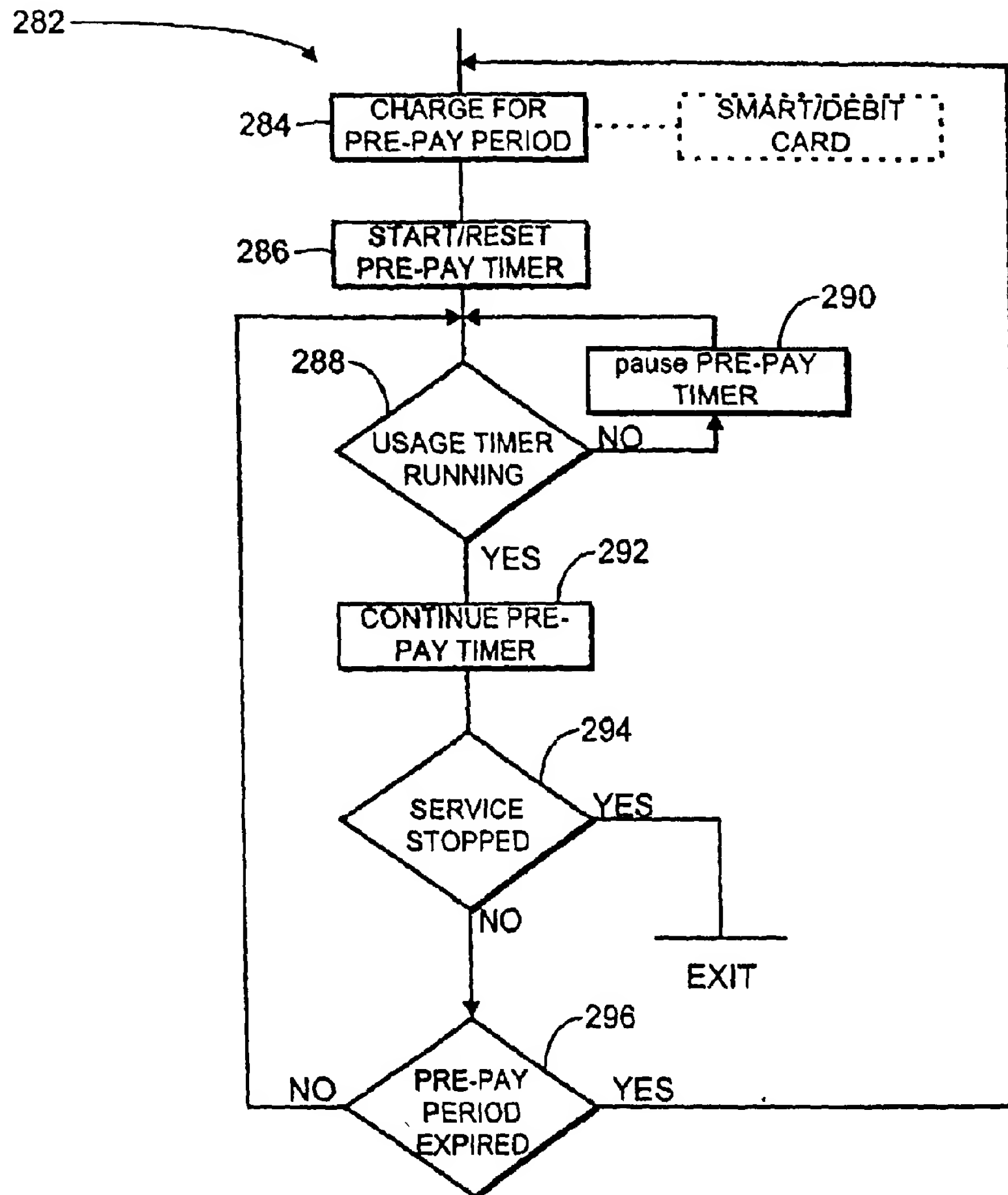


Fig. 13

TELEPHONE PROGRAM

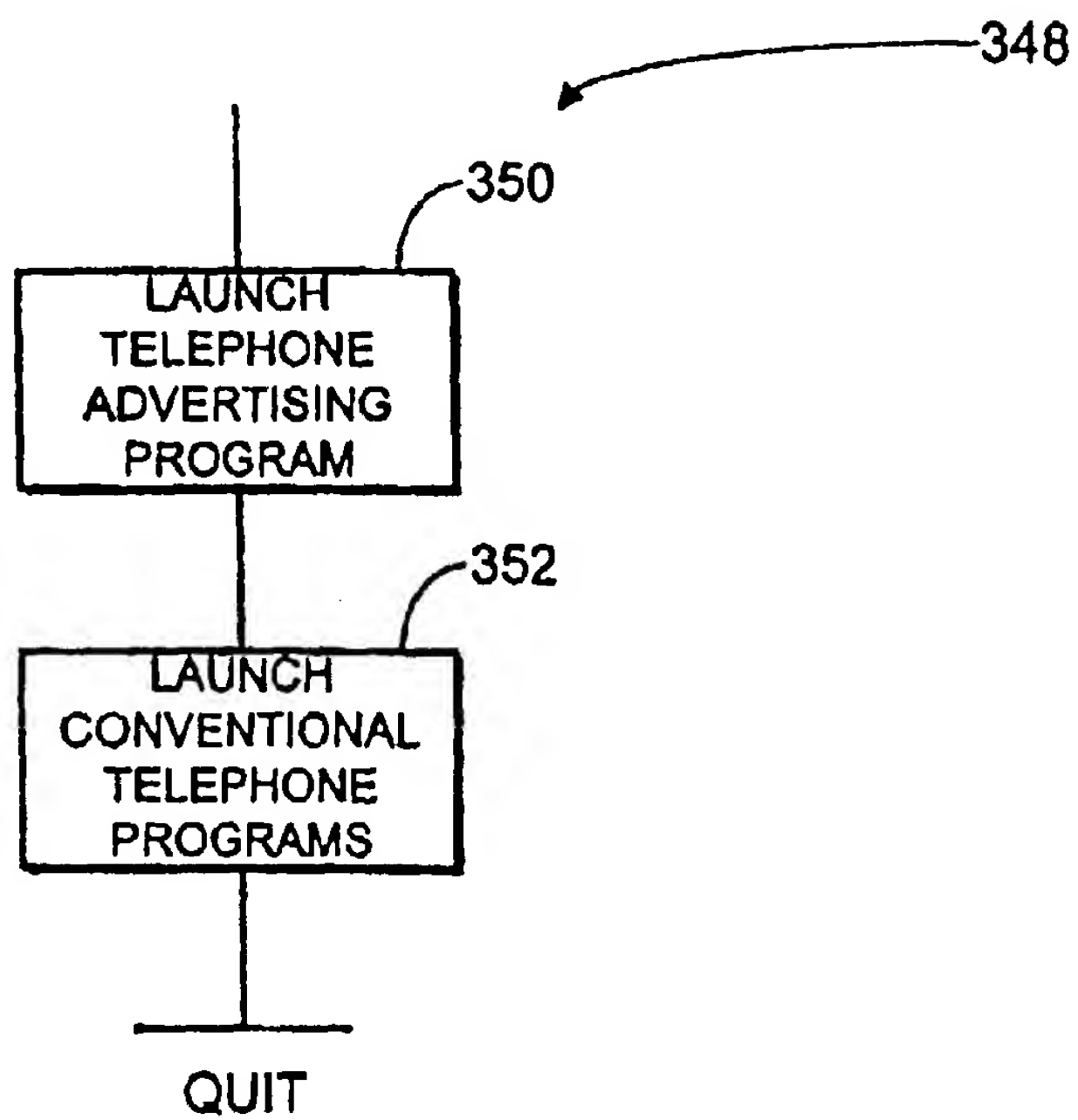


Fig. 14

TELEPHONE ADVERTISING PROGRAM

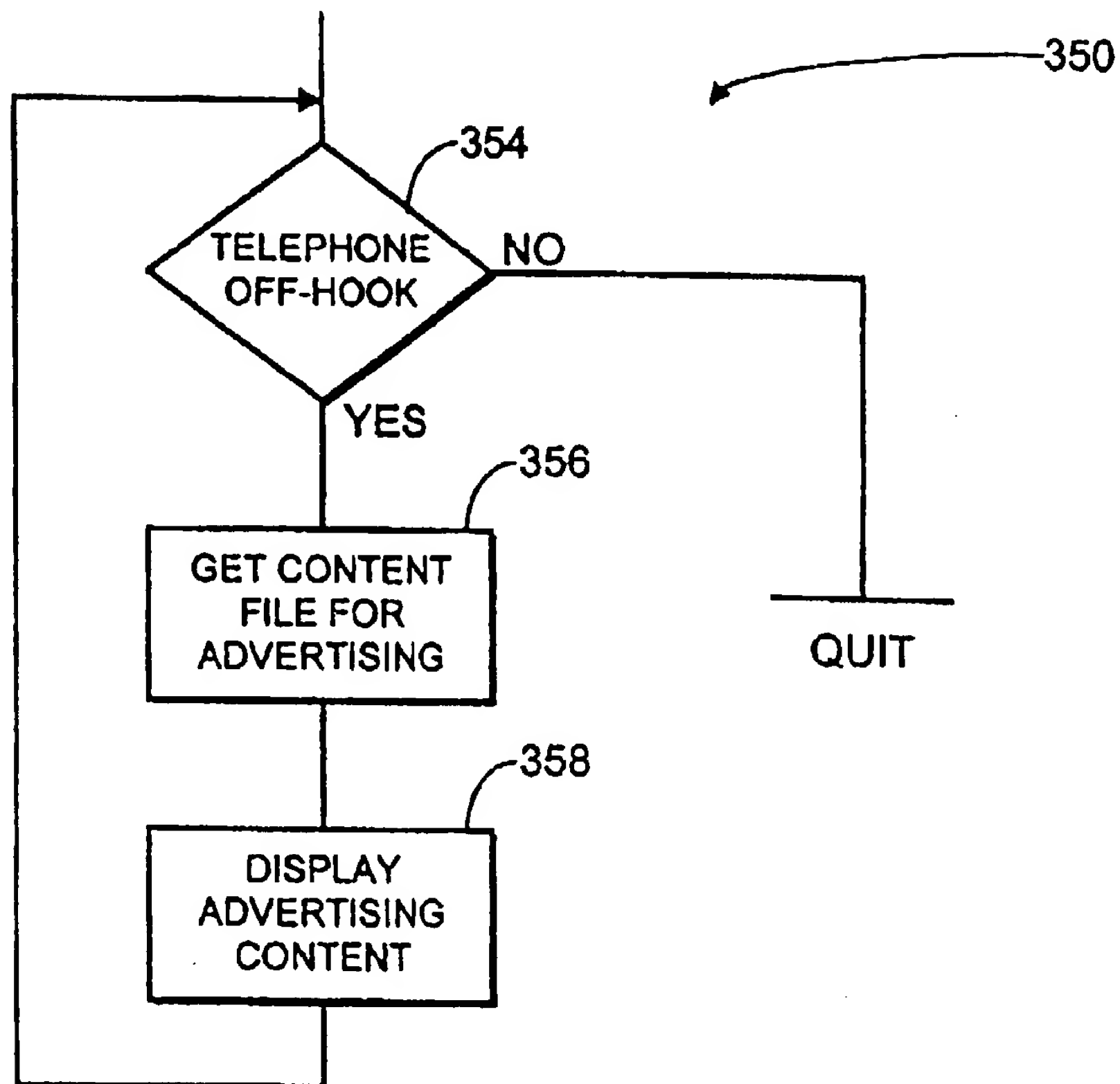


Fig. 15

LOAD CONTENT HTML PAGE

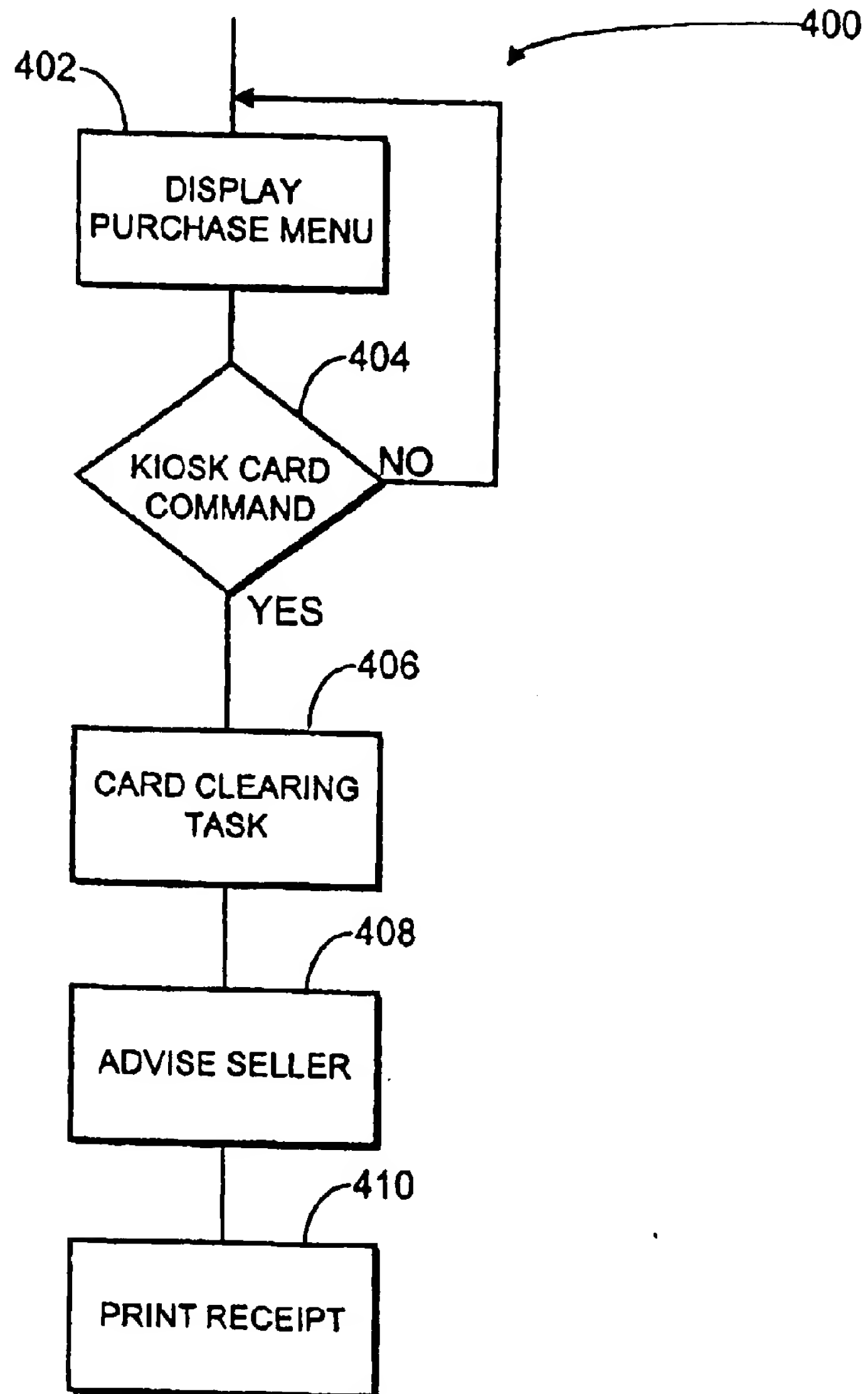


Fig. 16

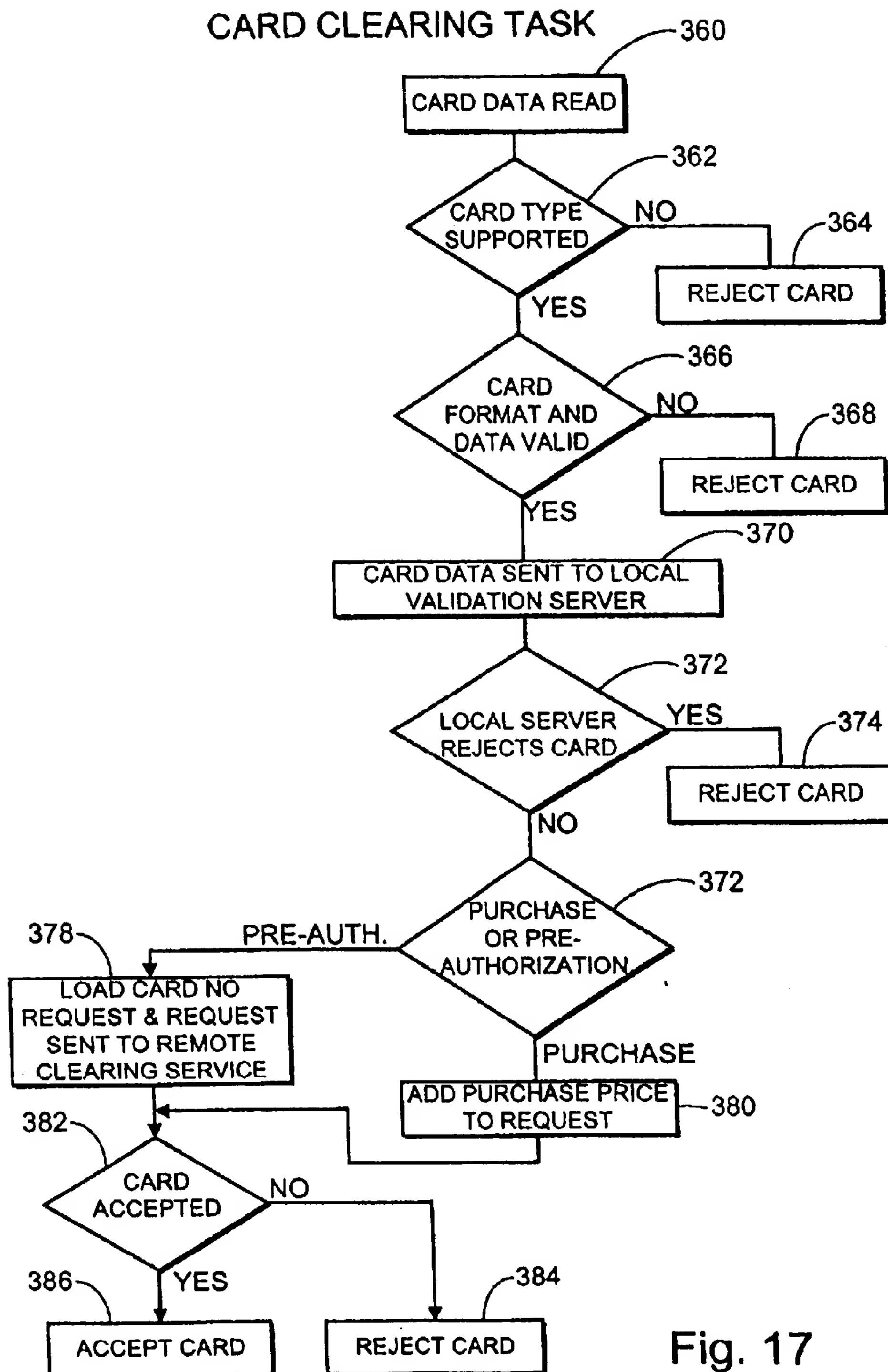


Fig. 17

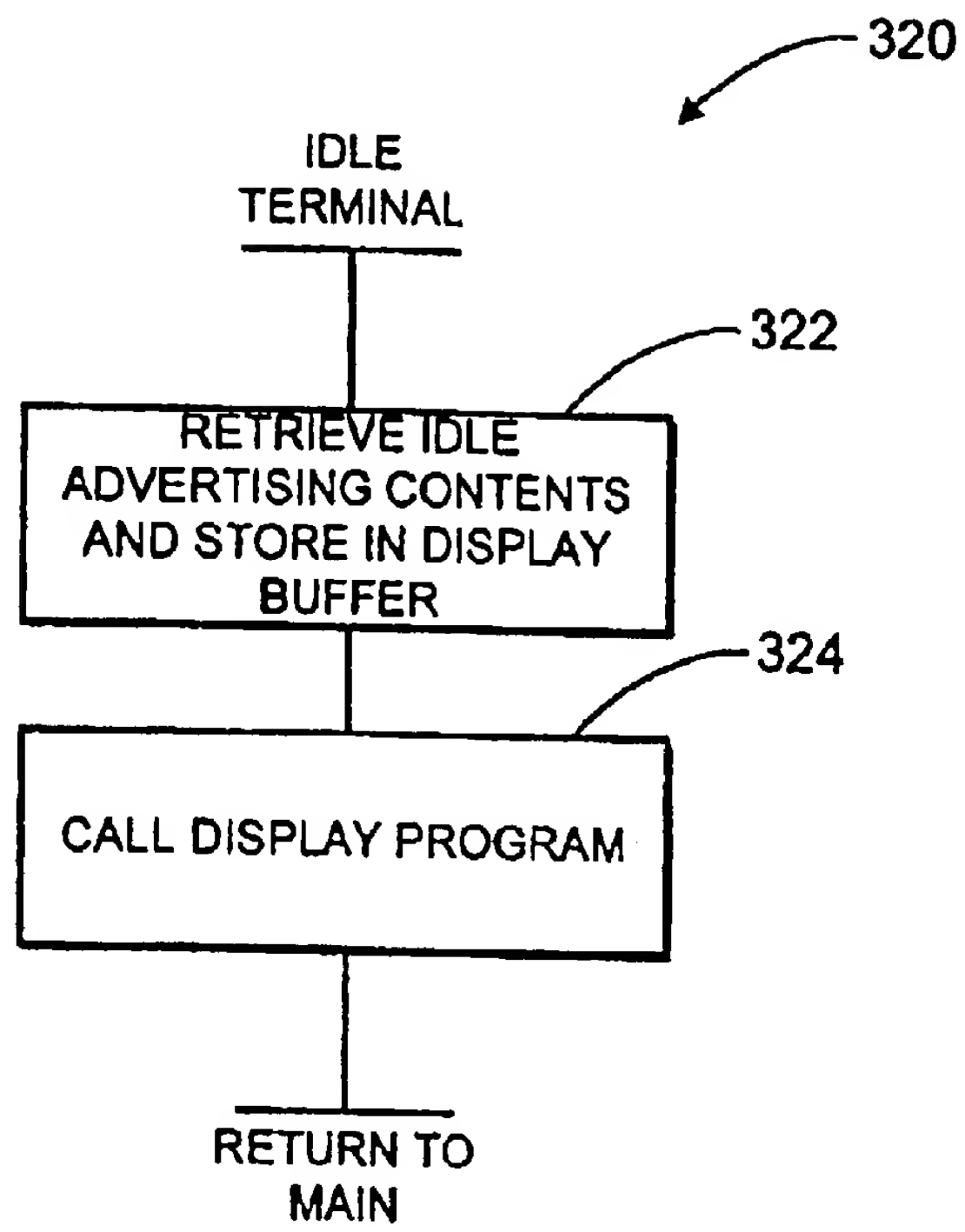


Fig. 18